

**AN EXPLORATION OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES
THAT SUPPORT AND ADDRESS THE ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT
GAP BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE STUDENTS IN A SUBURBAN
HIGH SCHOOL**

by

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**A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of Michigan – Flint in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Doctor of Education

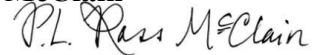
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2020, June

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DEDICATION

Words will never be able to capture the gratitude that my soul reflects for my parents, Angela and Harry Kennedy. They have always held my hand in many ways throughout my life to assure me that I am loved unconditionally. Like in many other journeys in my life, their phenomenal gifts of love, sacrifice, encouragement, and loyalty fueled my energy as a doctoral student. Their lives reflect achievement, perseverance, resilience, humility, and advocacy. I only hope that my walk through life is a reflection of their deepest desires and greatest hopes for my life. It was a gift that I was able to experience this journey with my parents. It is an honor to dedicate this work to Angela and Harry Kennedy.

With love and respect, I express deep gratitude for my husband, Alexander Rogers, Jr. Our marriage, partnership and friendship have remained as pillars in my life. I am grateful that he unselfishly gifted me with encouragement as I pursued my doctorate. He understood the importance of my need for undisturbed time to think, research, write and reflect. I remain eternally grateful to our son, Alexander L. Rogers, III. He is my breath and heartbeat. As he continues to evolve as a learner, I hope he is gifted with opportunities to stretch and soar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my dissertation chair, Dr. Tyrone Bynoe. His consistent phrase to me was “Keep your hands on the plough.” I kept my hands on the plough and have experienced success. I am grateful to Dr. Bynoe for his advocacy, presence, transparency, and encouragement. I know and believe he continued to hold onto the vision of my completing successfully the doctoral program. I appreciate Dr. Bynoe’s guidance and persistent help.

I am thankful that my committee members remained flexible, connected, and engaged. I appreciate that Dr. Robert Martin was always able to offer feedback that encouraged me to make my thinking visible so that my writing was robust and engaging. His direction assisted me with integrating my professional experience with my research. With a thoughtful focus, Dr. Pamela L. Ross McClain’s advice and counseling pushed my thinking so that it would become clearer and more concise. She provided key insights that strengthened my work. I am thankful for the valuable guidance that Dr. Chad Waldron offered my work during the research proposal stage.

May Dr. Bynoe, Dr. Martin, Dr. Ross McClain and Dr. Waldron know that my success is also their success. May they continue to find purpose in serving, leading, advocating and encouraging doctoral students to reach beyond their limits to serve the field of educational leadership.

Finally, thank you to all of the students and educators I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with during my career as an educator. My love and respect for education are grounded in the relationships I have been able to cultivate with students and fellow educators over the past 20 years. May education continue to be a change agent for equity and social justice.

ABSTRACT

Student enrollment data identified that Black students are learners in suburban schools. Data revealed that the academic achievement gap between Black and White students has been persistent in suburban schools. Effective central office leadership is essential to ensuring optimal student outcomes, which includes addressing racial academic achievement gaps. This case study explored central office leadership practices supporting a suburban high school that had documented academic achievement gaps between Black and White students. A single exploratory case study methodology was implemented to conduct this study. To ensure confidence in the study, the between-methods triangulation process of key informant interviews, direct observations, and document reviews was utilized. The data analysis phase consisted of transcribing and coding the data that were collected. The grouping of the codes led to the development of the broader categories of themes for answering the research questions. Findings indicated that central office leaders practiced top-down development strategies, engaged in joint work to gain buy-in and divide responsibilities, and inquired about school needs to facilitate solutions. The perceived strengths of central office practices were developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions and academic supports. The perceived weaknesses of central office practices were the omission of explicit reference to the racial achievement gap between Black and White students in district and school level goals and strategies. Another factor that was perceived likely to have a negative impact on students' academic achievement was inadequate attention to their social-emotional development combined with the overall well-being of teachers.

Keywords: leadership, achievement gaps, student-achievement, supervision

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This research practitioner explored how central office leadership supports and practices were utilized to support a Midwestern suburban high school with a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students, as evidenced by state assessment achievement scores. Educators have worked to ensure that all students are afforded educational opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to meet academic expectations. Unfortunately, many students still do not meet the minimum bar of academic success, regardless if they are educated in urban or suburban school systems. When addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students, the vision, goals, strategies and practices between school leadership and district leadership should remain in alignment.

Given the above, this introduction chapter is subdivided into the following sections: Summary of the Study's Problem Statement and Research Questions, Purpose of the Study, Significance of the Study, Limitations, and Delimitations. The last section, Key Definitions and Understandings, provided meaning and clarity to important terms and concepts utilized in this case study. The research practitioner concluded the chapter with a summary.

Problem Statement

Student enrollment data in the United States has shown that Black students are learners in majority White suburban schools. For the 2010-2011 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, n.d.) reported the enrollment data based on race/ethnicity and locale. Black students comprised approximately 14% of the student enrollment population in suburban schools, while White students comprised 54% of the student enrollment population (NCES, n.d.).

Chubb and Loveless (2004) identified that in 1966, a team of federally sponsored researchers conducted the first comprehensive study of student achievement to show a large

achievement gap between Black and White students. This achievement gap has continued until the present time. In reference to achievement data in suburban schools, a prime example of the current gap between Black and White students is exemplified by the outcome of the Spring 2019 Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) data in one suburban Michigan county. From reviewing an online student data portal (www.mischooldata.org), 40.9% of White students in this specific county demonstrated a proficiency rate of meeting or exceeding bench marks for the math portion of the SAT test, while only 8.4% of Black students met or exceeded the math bench marks. In regard to the portion of the test that is focused on evidence-based reading and writing, only 24.8% of Black students met or exceeded the benchmarks, while 60.4% of their White counterparts met or exceeded the benchmarks. These types of data, as explained in the next chapter, have shown support for the urgent need of effective educational leadership that addresses the academic disparities that continue to persist in our American education system. Datnow and Castellano (2001) asserted, “It is axiomatic that strong leadership is critical for successful whole-school reform” (p. 219). Central office leaders and building level leaders must move forward to confront these gaps in a coherent, effective, and sustainable manner in order to address successfully the huge disparity in the academic achievement gaps between Black and White students.

Research Questions

This research practitioner contributed to existing research by exploring how central office leadership practices supported a suburban high school experiencing an academic achievement gap between Black and White students, as evidenced by state level assessment data.

The research practitioner used the following research questions to direct the exploratory case study:

1. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*
2. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?*
3. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students within a suburban high school?*
4. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore specific central office leadership supports and practices linked to addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in a suburban high school. The Wallace Foundation (2013) funded a 5-year study to illustrate the factors associated with successful educational leadership at the state, district, and school levels and how leadership could improve student learning. Regarding the responsibility of district-level leadership, Louis et al. (2010) affirmed the following:

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), for example, extends accountability for student learning beyond the school house to the organizations that, in all states, continue to make crucial decisions about the use of resources for school improvement. The Act also specifies new roles for school districts in reform activity. (p. 105).

All stakeholders remain accountable to student learning as educational policy has evolved. In recent years, leaders created the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, for state leaders to develop plans to address achievement gaps and improve outcomes for all students.

The major task of school and district improvement is to ensure that instructional practices and programs are in alignment with the goals of student achievement for all students. King (2002) highlighted that the role of school and district leadership had expanded to focus on instructional leadership that directly impacts student learning outcomes: “With leadership for student learning as the priority, instructional leadership might simply be described as ‘anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning in their schools and districts’” (p. 62). District and school leaders should, without further delay, move collectively forward due to the long-lasting existence of the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) supported this finding: “How a school determines the right work requires a structured and collaborative approach that will determine goals, action steps and continuous evaluation” (p. 76).

Honig (2012) contended that deficits existed in providing specifics about what central office leaders actually did when they provided support to principals to improve the academic outcomes of students. Therefore, this research practitioner identified and explored central office leadership supports and practices linked to addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Furthermore, this research practitioner detailed evidence of the influence of central office leadership supports and practices for addressing the academic achievement gap.

Significance of the Study

Disparities in America's educational system demand reform focused heavily on social justice. The academic achievement gap between Black and White students is a significant social justice issue. There are numerous formal definitions of social justice. The common understanding of justice is basic fairness. Fairness seems to encompass all persons having equitable rights, equitable opportunities, and equitable treatment.

The racial academic achievement gap has continued to beset our society as a critical social justice issue. To transform school communities, collaboration must occur between and among concerned and affected parties. A broad coalition of all stakeholders such as policy makers, state and local leaders, district-level educational leaders, principals, teachers, support staff, families, community partners and, importantly, reflective students must be assembled, operate and function with a sense of emergency.

As the literature review chapter will show, researchers and other policy pundits and advocates have studied extensively the subject of narrowing or closing the academic achievement gap (Carruthers, Llamas, & Salinas, 2013; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Rowley & Wright, 2011; Zhao, 2016). It appears that researchers who have analyzed the academic achievement gap between Black and White students have focused on large school districts in urban environments (Honig, 2012). Examining carefully the conditions and dilemmas faced by millions of mostly poor urban-dwelling Black families is, of course, a worthwhile and important endeavor. However, Black families are heterogeneous and are socioeconomically and educationally diverse. Thousands of Black children receive their education in America's suburban schools. It would, therefore, seem wise and helpful to examine the conditions and

circumstances encountered by Black students and families in suburban school communities that have resulted in an academic gap between those Black and White students.

This research practitioner found it essential to explore the role and experience of the leaders of suburban school districts in actively tackling the academic achievement gap at a broader and deeper level. Through the lens of social justice, there is great significance in critically examining this phenomenon that adversely affects the life chances of Black children in a geographic environment where millions live. The results may show a wider-ranging perspective and understanding of the academic achievement gap than past research (Honig, 2012).

Limitations

The research practitioner defined the limitations of this research study as influenced by conditions over which a research practitioner might not have control, as suggested by researchers (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Case study research is time consuming. The qualitative case study research process can be long and tedious due, in great part, to data collection and analysis procedures (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2001). Therefore, this research practitioner exercised diligence when collecting and analyzing the data sets. This research practitioner used time management and self-discipline as essential elements in conducting the case study within a reasonable amount of time and in a feasible manner to accomplish these goals.

Subjectivity and bias were limitations because the research practitioner handled the collection and the analysis of the data. These elements are acknowledged and addressed in the methodology section. The research practitioner verified trustworthiness using the between-methods triangulation approach. The research participants verified accuracy of statements. A

digital research journal that contained personal reflections and discussions about potential biases was maintained and utilized throughout the study.

The results of the study were limited by the necessity of relying on honest and authentic insights and responses by the participants. Participants could alter their responses or change their behaviors because they were concerned about possible repercussions; therefore, the research practitioner communicated to ensure confidentiality while building and fostering genuine relationships of trust with each participant.

The research practitioner did not gain access to some necessary and important data collection sources during the study due to restraints of the research techniques. These techniques were key informant interviews, direct observations, and review of documents. The lack of access was due to schedule conflicts, time constraints, or confidentiality and privacy matters. The research practitioner maintained flexibility in scheduling and honoring appointments, as well as adhering to various agreed-upon timelines. The research practitioner remained aware and respected that district leaders deal with confidential and private matters. The research practitioner did not encourage, tolerate, or allow the participants to breach the principles of confidentiality and privacy. Likewise, the research practitioner always respected and upheld these principles by acting in an ethical, discreet, and diplomatic manner.

Delimitations

Delimitations refer to boundaries of the research set by the research practitioner to ensure both the manageability and feasibility of the case study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The chief delimitation of this study was the selected research sample. The research sample was restricted to one high school located in a suburban school district. This single case study design was

selected because it was more practical than a multi-case study due to time constraints and resources available to the research practitioner.

The decision to study the particular district's high school was based on its suburban location, student demographic data, and state assessment student achievement data. Inasmuch as the selected school was located in a suburban community and had a documented achievement gap between Black and White students, the research practitioner opined that this district and this high school represented an ideal environment to explore, analyze, and understand central office leadership support and practices to address the research questions.

Key Definitions and Understandings

The research practitioner identified and explained key terms and understandings used throughout this research study. The goal of this section is to provide common understanding, explanations, and clarity about the context of the study. This research practitioner used these terms to frame how central office leaders supported building level administrators in a Midwestern suburban high school. The research practitioner provided specific examples of how central office leadership supports and practices were conducted and what perceived impact those leaders had on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Academic achievement gap: Academic achievement gap refers to the academic outcome disparity between groups of students based on standardized assessments. Anderson, Medrich, and Fowler (2007) explained that the academic achievement gap “refers to the differences in scores on state or national achievement tests between various student demographic groups” (p. 547). Public education in the United States has been the object of reform efforts for decades (Carruthers et al., 2013). Leaders of school reform have focused on addressing the academic achievement gap among historically disenfranchised students. United States society and leaders

of its public education system have faced the academic achievement gap between Black and White students for decades. Yong Zhao (2016) proclaimed, “The ‘achievement gap’ has become synonymous with educational inequality” (p. 721). Minority students have, on average, performed worse than White students on indicators of academic success: standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college matriculation rates (Zhao, 2016).

Central office leaders: For this case study, central office leaders (COLs) consisted of the district superintendent, the director of instruction and assessment (DIA), and the director of special education (SPED).

Label of racial categorization: Black and White students: The research practitioner used Michigan Department of Education’s online public data portal, entitled MI School Data (2019), to gather student performance data based on demographics related to race. For this study, the research practitioner used this data portal to reach multiple updated, relevant, and comprehensive student performance data reports that were comprised of statewide, intermediate school, district, school, and college level information. Reports were generated by categories. When searching for data based on the “Race/Ethnicity” category, the labels were defined as “Black or African-American” and “White.” For this study, “Black” and “White” were utilized for concise and consistent discussion and reporting purposes throughout the research project. The selection of these terms was not based on the research practitioner’s personal ideology and philosophical preferences regarding racial categorization.

Research practitioner: The term research practitioner was used throughout the study to identify the primary investigator of the case study. Research practitioner was utilized because of the primary investigator’s interconnection between the dual role of researcher and educational leader in a school district. In support of the dual role, Menter et al. (2011) stated, “Practitioner

research in education is systemic enquiry in an educational setting carried out by someone working in that setting, that outcomes of which are shared with other practitioners” (p. 3).

State assessments: In spring 2016, Michigan transitioned to utilizing the national Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as the new required state assessment for 11th grade students as a means for state student performance reporting and accountability purposes. The high school and district selected for this case study experienced an academic achievement gap between Black and White students on the SAT during for the Spring 2017, Spring 2018, and Spring 2019 testing cycles.

Chapter Summary

The research practitioner introduced the major components of this exploratory case study to show the conditions of support required from central office leadership to improve the learning outcomes of Black students in a Midwestern suburban high school with a documented state assessment that identified an academic achievement gap between Black and White students. The research practitioner provided background information about the study, its purpose, its significance, and its anticipated limitations and delimitations. The research practitioner provided and defined key terms and concepts to enhance the reader’s understanding and usage of those expressions and ideas utilized within the study.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The research practitioner examined relevant literature pertinent to the research questions of interest while preparing for this exploratory case study. The pervasive academic achievement gap between Black and White students in American public education serve as the center of discussion in this literature review section. The research practitioner explained educational reform policies to address the disparities. The research practitioner provided current state and national standardized assessment achievement data as evidence of the persistent academic achievement gap between Black and White students despite the efforts of school reform initiatives. The research practitioner examined the impact that the relationships, interactions, and connections among building and district leadership have on school reform initiatives and student achievement outcomes. The literature review also incorporates a discussion of changing racial demographics in suburban schools and the response to such changes. The research practitioner identified, analyzed, and synthesized sources that show the importance of school districts' central office administrators in supporting and assisting building-level principals to ensure high-quality effective teaching and learning. This support and assistance from central office administrators are given for the purpose of addressing the academic achievement gap and improving student achievement for all students.

The Academic Achievement Gap and Educational Policy

American society and its public education system leaders have faced the academic achievement gap between Black and White students for decades. Zhao (2016) proclaimed, "The 'achievement gap' has become synonymous with educational inequality" (p.721). Public education in the United States has been the object of reform efforts for decades (Carruthers et al., 2013). Student performance data have shown the ongoing need to address the academic

achievement gap that continues. As indicated by Zhao (2016), minority students have, on average, performed poorer than White students on indicators of academic success: standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and college matriculation rates. Due to the persistently low achievement scores of minority students over time, leaders of education systems and various government entities have attempted to address the achievement gaps.

At the government level, leaders have created, implemented, and regulated federal and state legislation and educational policies to provide guidance, support, and direction about strategies to address the academic achievement gap. Leaders of these outcomes and reforms have considered a long-standing issue around inequality in public education in the United States. Rowley and Wright (2011) stated, “The issue of racial inequality in education has consistently been addressed through government policy in an attempt to solve the problem of discrimination in the American school system” (p. 93). Of great significance is that the Civil Rights movement led to the United States Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which ruled that segregation of children by race in public schools represents a violation of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

When President John F. Kennedy assumed office in 1961, he proposed federal aid to improve education of Black children and of other poor and disadvantaged youth; however, most of his initiatives were not enacted because of fears of forced integration, opposition to federal control over schools and concern about private and parochial schools being left out of funding streams (Jennings, 2000). On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson, who succeeded President Kennedy following his assassination, signed the Civil Rights Act (1964), to deconstruct legal barriers to the full engagement of people of color in the American social order (Jennings, 2000). In November 1964, when Johnson was elected president, a commission on education that he

established earlier that year recommended that leaders should target federal aid to children in need as tied it to the multifaceted War on Poverty launched by him in 1963.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) was also established during President Johnson's administration as part of the goals of the War on Poverty initiative. Leaders used the ESEA (1965) to establish federal Title I funding to provide substantial new financial resources to support disadvantaged children, connected to the outcomes of his administration's work on the War on Poverty. Jennings (2000) stated, "The ESEA . . . became the centerpiece of President Johnson's efforts to improve the lot of poor and minority youngsters and the Title I program was the crown jewel of the ESEA" (p. 517). In return for federal funding through ESEA, leaders of states, local educational agencies, and public-school districts had to show that they worked to meet the needs and to provide a quality education to all of their students, regardless of family income, race, ethnicity, or any other demographic characteristic.

Leaders have reauthorized ESEA six times since 1965. During the 21st century, leaders have reauthorized the act twice. Leaders of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB), passed during President George. W. Bush's tenure, required states to meet annual progress goals that envisioned having 100% of all children on grade level by 2014. Darling-Hammond (2007) maintained that the federal law should have raised the achievement levels of all students and close the achievement gap reflective of race and socioeconomic class. She noted that unintended consequences emerged, including a major concern that excessive reliance existed on standardized tests. Darling-Hammond (2007) maintained that the federal law was underfunded, forcing leaders of states and local school districts to implement these mandates without the necessary funding: "Merely adopting tests and punishments will not create an accountability

system that increases the likelihood of good practice and reduces the likelihood of harmful practices” (p. 258).

On December 15, 2015, President Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (2015), the sixth reauthorization of the federal ESEA (1965), with rare bipartisan support. The president used the ESSA (2015) to offer flexibility to states about certain requirements of the NCLB (2002) in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students (Congressional Digest, 2017). State leaders could develop ESSA (2015) plans due to this change in federal education legislation; therefore, leaders of state education departments could set their own academic goals and their own consequences for schools that did not reach those goals. Leaders could recognize the value of the academic growth of students beyond whether students performed at grade level (Education Week, 2016).

Once the U.S. Department of Education approved the ESSA (2015), state leaders developed their own accountability plans reflective of those expectations. On March 13, 2017, members of the U.S. Department of Education released an updated template that identified the necessary components for each state’s ESSA consolidated plan. This document demonstrated the need for states to develop plans that addressed standards, state assessments, school and district accountability and targeted assistance for academically struggling schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Specifically, state consolidated plans were also to address how the persistent critical issue of the achievement gap in public education would be approached and monitored (Education Week, 2016). These plans required states to set forth strategic plans, goals, action steps and academic assessment mechanisms that were to be monitored to determine educational needs.

The Academic Achievement Gap and Standardized Assessment Outcomes

As state leaders carry out their plans built on the foundation of the ESSA (2015), there have been changes in state assessments. As an example, in January 2015, the state of Michigan announced plans to transition to administering the national Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as the new required state performance and accountability test for 11th grade students starting the Spring 2016 testing cycle (Michigan Department of Education, 2015). Previously, 11th graders in this state completed the national American College Testing (ACT) assessment. Leadership uses the SAT to determine a student's readiness for post-secondary options, such as entering into college or starting a career.

The College Board (2019) is a nonprofit organization that owns, develops, and publishes the SAT. This organization leaders define students as college and career ready when the section scores meet both the Math and the Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (EBRW) benchmarks. The College Board (2019) website provides an explanation of benchmark scoring. The scores on the math and EBRW sections range between 200 to 800 points. Regarding the math benchmarks, a student who scores between 200 to 500 points is considered academically behind by at least 1 year. A student is considered meeting or exceeding if he or she scores between 530 to 800 points. A student who scores between 200 to 450 points on the EBRW section is considered below by at least 1 year's academic growth based on the benchmarks. If a student's scores between 480 to 800 points, the student's performance indicated that he or she has met or exceeded the benchmark expectations. The readiness benchmarks are significant because those benchmarks are aligned to student success in entry-level college courses. A student who meets or exceeds the SAT benchmark expectations has a 75% likelihood of achieving at least a C grade in first-semester, credit-bearing, and content-related college courses in math or EBRW.

A review of the most recent student academic performance results from Michigan Department of Education MI School Data (2019) online data portal resource showed that the trend of achievement gaps between Black and White students remained wide across the state for the Spring 2019 testing cycle for the SAT test. In the math section, 41.8% of White students met the college readiness benchmarks. In comparison, 10.4% of Black students met the college readiness benchmarks. The percentage of White students who met the college readiness benchmarks for EBRW was 62.1. The percentage of Black students who met the college readiness benchmarks was 26.6. The outcomes of this data sample showed that academic achievement gap between Black and White students continued. The academic achievement gap, as evidenced by SAT student performance outcomes, has shown that Black students' chances of being successful in college are lessened as compared to their White peers.

All 50 states participated in the 2017 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and mathematics assessments at Grades 4 and 8 every two years. Sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (n.d.b), NAEP is a congressionally mandated project. The assessments are administered every 2 years to students in fourth, eighth, and 12th grades in the largest continuing and nationally representative assessment of what students know in mathematics, reading, science, and writing. The NCES functions within the U.S. Department of Education (2017) and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES; NCES, n.d.).

The results of eighth grade math and reading in the 2017 NCES (2018) report cards show examples of the continued racial achievement disparities across the United States. The NCES (2018) created the online accessible report card, *The Nation's Report Card*, and identified that in math, 44% of White eighth grade students performed at or above the proficient level. In

comparison, 13% of Black eighth grade students performed at or above the proficient level. In reading, 45% of White eighth grade students performed at or above the proficient level, while 18% of eighth grade Black students performed at or above the proficient level.

The academic achievement gap between Black and White students continues to persist despite the reiterations of education policy. The results of these national tests have shown that leaders of the United States, including the Michigan example, struggle to address the academic needs of Black students. As those in the United States continue to reform education under the provisions of ESSA (2015), one should consider what changes and action steps have occurred at the local level in school districts. The leadership practices of teachers, principals, and district administrators in addressing student achievement are essential to closing the ever-present academic achievement gaps.

Collaborative Educational Leadership

If state leaders meet their goals in their ESSA (2015) accountability plans to address the academic achievement gap, local school district leaders will need to engage in continuous, collaborative, and collective leadership among teacher leaders, principals, and central office administrators to generate meaningful action and changes in public schools. Belisle (2004) asserted that hierarchical leadership structures did not meet the needs of an educational organization. The researcher opined that shared leadership, also known as collective leadership, was needed to promote positive and lasting school reforms, which might impact these persistent academic gaps in a positive way.

Stakeholders should rethink the definition of leadership across schools and districts as leaders carry out the work of transformative and sustainable improvements to address this particular academic achievement gap. Simkins (2015) explained his advocacy for an emerging

view of educational leadership that encompasses the idea that leadership could occur anywhere in contrast to the traditional view that leadership was hierarchically based and directly linked to an office. Further, Simkins (2015) focused on “what makes sense” as a practical matter and asserted the importance of cooperation and collaboration over hierarchical control as involving “making sense of the ways in which leadership roles are changing and should change” and “making sense of the ways in which power and authority are and should be constituted and distributed in educational organization” (p. 23). Leaders of school districts and schools should implement structures, processes, and practices to promote collective responsibility and shared leadership among stakeholders due to the need to address the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Teacher Leadership and Student Outcomes

The premise of shared leadership refers to the development and promotion of teacher leadership, which may make a positive impact on the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Regarding emphasizing the importance of teacher leadership and building administration alignment, Leithwood (2016) asserted, “The farther away from students’ direct experiences is the work carried out at an organizational level, the less that level of work influences student performance” (p. 119). Leithwood (2016) focused on the role that department heads at the secondary level could play in school improvement. Most often, department heads are also teachers; therefore, they are close to classroom operations on a daily basis. Leithwood asserted that a common perspective and belief showed that secondary schools were resistant to reform primarily due to the underutilization or untapped potential for instructional leadership by department heads.

Leithwood (2016) found that leaders of departments and department heads in secondary schools had a greater influence on student learning than the influence of school-level leaders. Notwithstanding complex challenges related to some teachers, teachers' unions, and building leaders, Leithwood (2016) indicated that "the contribution of department-head leadership is likely greater than the contribution of principal leadership to the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 135). Leithwood (2016) emphasized the importance of collaboration with school-level leaders before enacting department head instructional leadership. Leaders require full support to provide the resources and synergy necessary to improve student achievement. Teachers must receive continued support to extend their leadership beyond the classrooms so that it resonates throughout the school community due to the complex, challenging, and dynamic roles of building-based leadership.

School leaders should rethink how leadership is defined to accomplish positive outcomes in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Brezicha, Bergmark, and Mitra (2015) emphasized the benefit of teachers' diverse voices, views, philosophies, and unique professional needs when focusing on school reform. These authors noted the value of student achievement outcomes when teachers acted as agents within the context of leadership, implementing changes and reforms by putting those into practice. Brezicha et al. (2015) conducted this case study of one school's reform efforts central to show that "despite the excellent educators working there, many of their best efforts were stymied by a failure to consider teachers' diverse personal philosophies, experiences, social networks and supports" (p. 98). For student success to be achieved, building-based leaders must also cultivate school communities that promote, encourage, and utilize the diversity of teachers' experiences and perspectives to actualize gains in student outcomes through differentiated leadership. The

authors' findings showed the critical nature of differentiated leadership, as well as an understanding of the mutually-dependent and inter-reliant relationships necessary for successful school reforms, such as addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Their findings suggest the critical nature of differentiated leadership and an understanding of the mutually dependent and inter-reliant relationships necessary for successful school reforms.

Building-Based Principal Leadership and Student Outcomes

As teachers engage in leadership opportunities and classroom responsibilities that enhance student outcomes, they must be led and guided by principals—the individuals who represent building based leadership. These individuals handle student achievement and the successful navigation of an ever-changing school environment. Belisle (2004) defined the principal as the instructional leader of his or her school, while facing an increasing number of issues related, among others, to operational responsibilities and accountability to the district, to families, and to the broader community. Regardless of the many demands, building leaders play pivotal roles in the outcomes of student learning. Bush and Glover (2014) claimed, “It is widely recognized that leadership is second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student learning” (p. 553). The authors emphasized building principals handled promoting high expectations for student learning. Therefore, how a building based leader supports and holds teachers accountable matters to student learning outcomes.

The continued efforts of principals to promote collaborative and reciprocal relationships with teachers help eliminate the mindset that teachers should stay in their classroom all day and keep their opinions to themselves. Belisle (2004) emphasized that if shared leadership would work in the best interest of all concerned, the principal must fully support the notion and practice

of shared leadership and shared decision-making. She suggested that the wise principal would provide opportunities for professional development and would support teachers by emphasizing and publicly commenting on their activities, contributions, and innovative classroom practices.

Belisle (2004) concluded, “Teachers . . . require greater opportunities for shared-decision making, participation in school governance and for collegial, cooperative teaching practices. Our schools are full of an abundance of underutilized talent” (p. 5). School leaders are more effective in their effort to implement innovations for school change when principals build collaborative learning environments despite the challenges of increased student performance accountability expectations. In her study of the principal’s leadership impact on literacy reform, Bell-Hobbs (2008) defined principal leadership as central to school improvement. The collective efforts, modeled and supported by the principal, are desperately needed to impact the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Principals must focus on cultivating, empowering, and supporting teachers’ experiences, abilities, skills, and visions so that more opportunities for student learning, growth, and positive outcomes occur.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) asserted that in an era of significant school reform and accountability, leaders have exerted efforts to improve schools by focusing on the principal to lead, organize, and facilitate change efforts at the school level. Furthermore, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) stated that without a principal’s leadership efforts to increase student achievement, school reform would not be successful (p. 573). Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) measured a principal’s sense of efficacy, meaning how capable and confident he or she felt to bring change. Principals must have confidence in their skills, knowledge, and experiences to develop impactful and sustainable changes by addressing critical and urgent student academic

performance matters, such as the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) explained the following:

With the role of the school principal being increasingly defined in terms of academic achievement and success as measured by high-stakes assessment results, a principal's sense of efficacy plays a critical role in meeting the expectations and demands of the position. (p. 582)

Regardless of high demands, principals must remain resilient and determined in their leadership to focus on the goals, strategies, and actions that will impact the achievement outcomes of all students, especially for those students at the low end of the academic achievement gaps. Lunenburg (2010) believed that the principal's primary responsibility was to promote the success of all students: "School principals can accomplish this goal by focusing on learning, encouraging collaboration, using data to improve learning, providing support and aligning curriculum, assessment, and instruction" (p. 5).

Not all individuals who serve in the principal role can focus on the impactful goals and action steps to lead and manage a school community characterized by high pressures to address low student performance. Tyre (2015) reported that the role of a principal was often accompanied by new expectations, pressures, and risks. Examples of these complex and challenging expectations, pressures, and risks involve leaders addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Tyre claimed that nearly 30% of principals who led troubled schools quit every year; by Year 3, more than half of all principals would leave their jobs. Furthermore, Tyre stated that most principals who led schools for low-income students would leave before they could make lasting changes, but the ones who remained often moved to schools with a more affluent student population whose needs were less overwhelming.

Principal leadership impacts student achievement. Principals should lead, facilitate, and sustain school reform efforts, which takes time to develop and flourish. According to Tyre

(2015), effective school leaders need at least 5 years to build trust among stakeholders and to experience the results of sustained school improvement. Based on this claim, if principals are not extending their time as the leader of a low-performing school, students are more than likely not experiencing academic achievement gains.

Related to identifying and understanding the reasons for high principal turnover, Friedman (2012) investigated the phenomenon of “burnout” in school principals. Often, Friedman found the dominant stressors related to teachers’ weak performance, lack of professionalism, and minimal motivation. Friedman cited another significant stressor as the unreasonable demands of parents and parents’ rude behaviors. Families and caregivers are considered the main partners of schools; therefore, principals have no choice but to work with them to address their demands and needs. Friedman cited subpar performance from the school’s support staff and maintenance staff as an additional stressor of the eventual burnout and loss of principals as school leaders. School communities face such stressors and experience quick and frequent principal turnover, which results in continued critical issues in student performance, such as the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

As school leaders engage in the practice and process of hiring new principals, school district leaders should ensure that “real-match” placements of principals occur. Real-match placements refer to a candidate with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that match the needs and challenges of the school that they aspire to lead. Burkhauser, Gates, Hamilton, and Ikemoto (2012) analyzed the working conditions faced and actions taken by first-year principals at a given school in six urban school districts, which included Memphis City Schools, Chicago Public Schools, New York City Public Schools, Washington, D.C. Public Schools, Baltimore City Public Schools, and the Oakland (California) Unified School District. Their findings

showed that over 20% new principals left their posts within 2 years and that those leading schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress targets were more likely to leave. The researchers found that members of buildings with principals vacating their roles after their first-year experienced lingering negative student performance consequences the following year. Burkhauser et al. (2012) suggested that improving principal placement was, in great part, dependent on school district-based leaders providing stronger support for principals, particularly those in low-performing schools. This author asserted that this strategy was essential to ensure continuity of leadership; therefore, the likelihood of achievement gains would increase by eliminating or narrowing academic achievement gaps between Black and White students.

School District Central Office Leadership and Student Outcomes

Leaders at the school district level, also known as central office leaders, determine the direction of educational reform in their districts. The primary district leader is the superintendent. Grove (2002) identified the superintendent “as the first instructional leader” (p. 45). Depending on the organizational structure of the district, other district-based leadership is composed of individuals and departments that oversee human resources, student services, curriculum, instruction, and finances. Inasmuch as state leaders have the flexibility to set their own academic goals and guidelines for student accountability through the ESSA (2015), district leaders carry out the expectations set forth by the state. The superintendent’s vision is pivotal in addressing the academic achievement gaps and the critical steps that must occur to make the vision a reality in the school district.

Collaborative leadership among teachers, principals, and central office leaders is essential in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Therefore, central office leaders play a vital role in overseeing and guiding instruction in the classrooms.

Improving instructional practices in every classroom for every student depends heavily on central office leaders providing focus, support, guidance, and coordination as well as directly or indirectly teaching and coaching all personnel throughout the district. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) argued, “School district personnel can exert a powerful influence on the kinds of instructional practices favored and supported across a district, and the degree of coherence in instructional guidance provided to teachers” (p. 39). Leadership, direction, and supports are needed from central office leaders for principals, teachers, and school communities to meet multiple student achievement goals, which include addressing academic achievement gaps.

Mac Iver and Farley (2003) concluded that every stakeholder in the school district that experiences success should build, embrace, and manage a district culture that emphasizes achievement. Mac Iver and Farley asserted that most school leaders, especially among those serving low-income children and families, could not improve instruction and achievement without some outside help. Taken together, these researchers across studies argued that the district’s central office was a logical source of capacity-building for schools to improve instruction and achievement. Grove (2002) highlighted the notion that in the era of changing academic standards, high stakes assessments, and increasing expectations of educators, the role of district leadership was even more important. Thus, school district-based leadership must lead, facilitate, monitor, and support reform that directly impacts student achievement.

Working under the auspices of Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel), Waters and Marzano (2006) led a research team that conducted a meta-analysis of quantitative research related to the influence of school district leaders on student performance. Findings from 27 studies conducted since 1970 were examined. These studies involved 2,817

districts and the achievement scores of 3.4 million students. This study established that district-level leadership is significant as documented by a positive correlation between district leadership and student achievement (p.10).

Waters and Marzano (2006) determined that effective superintendents focused their efforts on creating goal-oriented districts. Doing so required collaborative goal setting which meant engaging the participation of all relevant stakeholders. Board members, central office staff, school-based administrators, teachers, and staff are deemed as important to the process. Another key element was to set up non-negotiable goals for instruction and achievement. Specific targets must be established as well as ensuring the consistent use of research-based strategies in all classrooms for all students. In addition, Waters and Marzano (2006) asserted that high levels of achievement could be linked to support from the members of the board of education (pp. 3-4).

Waters and Marzano (2006) uncovered a surprising and puzzling finding. Building-level autonomy was shown to have both a positive and a negative correlation with student achievement. The research team concluded that effective superintendents may provide principals with what was identified as “defined autonomy”. This was interpreted to mean that principals will be expected to adhere to non-negotiable goals for learning and instruction, but will have the responsibility and authority to determine how those goals will be met (p. 4). The findings of this study suggested that superintendents, district office staff, and school board members can contribute to school and student success when they are focused sharply on fulfilling key leadership responsibilities by using evidence and best practices (p. 20). The findings gleaned from this study emphasized the engagement of educational leaders in continuous rigorous monitoring of progress toward student achievement and instructional goals which served as a

driving force for decision making and actions (p. 4). Arrangements for allocating a variety of resources consisting of time, funding, personnel, and materials must be made available if reform initiatives and replication are to be successful (p. 4).

It is significant to highlight that data collected by Waters and Marzano (2006) suggested that the length of a superintendent's tenure correlated positively with student achievement (pp. 4 and 20). Districts which experience high turnover in the top educational leadership positions struggle to keep a consistent agenda and approach. Corcoran, Fuhrman, and Belcher (2001) found that districts whose superintendents are fired or resign under pressure due to political and ideological forces can easily lose momentum and possibly regress (p. 82).

In recent years, researchers have focused on districts serving communities with large numbers of students portrayed as low-performing and hard-to-serve based on ethno-cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic diversity. In addition, many significant studies have concentrated on large urban school districts. A key example is Honig's (2012) in-depth comparative case study of the work practices of executive-level (e.g., superintendents) central office staff in New York City, Atlanta, Georgia, and Oakland, California.

Honig (2012) argued that the body of literature in this area of inquiry was deficient in providing specifics about how central office leaders support principals. She set forth the findings based on her complex research related to five explicit and detailed supports and practices that are identified as (a) focusing on joint work, (b) modeling effective behavior, (c) developing and using tools, (d) acting as a broker and a boundary spanner, and (e) creating and sustaining social engagement. These supports and practices represent a shift in the traditional roles of central office educational professionals which involves directing, managing, and monitoring principals from a distance.

Honig (2012) defined joint work as assistance relationships that allow central office leaders and principals to work alongside each other to achieve desired improvements and changes. Modeling involves central office leaders demonstrating desired behaviors and practices as opposed to just discussing expected behaviors. Central office leaders and principals develop and use tools to follow consistent protocols and practices. Leaders from both levels use these tools to deepen their engagement in school improvement and reform efforts. When central office leaders act as brokers and boundary spanners, they garner new resources, generate new ideas, and make connections with community partners who can positively impact improvement goals. Finally, principals and central office leaders can create and sustain social engagement by participating in conversations that produce shared agreements, new understandings, solutions to complex problems, and collective knowledge (Honig, 2012).

Honig (2012) asserted that her findings of these specific practices adopted by central office leadership set the stage for other researchers to explore conditions that help or impede central office executive staff. As school reform continues to unfold, central office leaders must move away from the structure of authority and delegators to collaborative and inclusive leaders. Barriers and impediments may result in the lack of focus on instructional leadership due to ongoing building operation needs or attempting to meet the overwhelming demands from central office. Honig (2012) claimed that this promising and shifting work of central office executive staff would cultivate lasting improvements in student learning and achievement. These sustainable improvements would be the result of strengthened instructional leadership practices of principals and teachers through the collaborative work and essential supports from central office leaders.

The work required for transforming schools is intricate and replete with challenges, both anticipated, and unanticipated. District leaders must remain conscious of the practices and supports that either help or hinder the daily work of principals. The Wallace Foundation (2013) focused on the role that district leadership plays in cultivating effective principal leadership in urban schools. The Wallace Foundation contended that until recently, many educators and policy makers overlooked the unique role that school district central leadership can play to help principals carry out their responsibility to improve teaching and learning. The Wallace Foundation asserted, “First, solid leadership is a pre-requisite for turning around failing and low performing schools in U.S. cities. Second, districts should place strong leaders in these schools and support them to the fullest so the schools improve” (p. 7).

District central office superintendents and their leadership teams have been challenged by the increasing demands of federal and state policy makers to utilize evidence in their decision-making processes related to improving teaching and learning in all classrooms for all students. In turn, these demands require that those same policy makers endeavor to improve their understanding of the various sources of evidence, what evidence use requires in all its forms, and the conditions that either support or hinder the use of evidence to narrow or eliminate achievement gaps.

Corcoran, Fuhrman, and Belcher (2001) questioned whether changing conditions such as shifts in leadership, new federal and state policies and fluctuations in funding serve as impediments that impact negatively the capacity of districts to provide focus, support, and scale up successful reforms. They also inquired about the impact on district capacity related to competition among organizations that provide comprehensive school reform research-based instructional improvement strategies. Working with the support of the Consortium for Policy

Research in Education (CPRE), Corcoran et al. (2001) examined three large urban districts in three different states. The findings of this study were organized into three major categories representing the main decisions any type of organization need to make that seeks to improve its performance. Those categories were: 1) deciding what to do—design and adoption; 2) determining how to get it done—support and coordination, and 3) scaling up by expanding successful reforms—replication (p.79).

The Corcoran et al. (2001) study found that district central office staff struggled to define their roles; this was described by the authors as an agonizing process (p. 79). For example, central office educational leaders wanted schools to be active in identifying their roles in the process, but, at the same time, they wanted the schools to adopt best practices. Examples of questions were set forth: “Should schools be left to figure it out for themselves, or should the central office point them in the right direction and limit their options? Should the role of the central office be limited to providing schools with good information about specific programs and designs, including what the research evidence shows?” (p. 79).

Shifting to evidence-based practice proved to be difficult and thorny for all three districts even though they pursued different paths. Further, it was found that: “Commitment to the use of evidence and efforts to use evidence were much stronger in the central offices in all three sites than they were among school staffs” (p. 81). Often district staff was frustrated by the lack of research on key issues, difficulty obtaining recent studies, lack of readily available syntheses, and contradictory findings. While school-based staff paid lip service to using research, in reality they were more confident in recommendations from other teachers (p.81). The research evidence was difficult for some principals and many teachers to interpret. “So the

decentralization of decision making combined with weak district guidance appeared to be undermining the use of knowledge rather than promoting it” (p. 81).

The intense pressure to enact measures to raise scores made it difficult to proceed methodically and thoughtfully. Turnaround strategies in school districts can take time to realize an impact on student performance. Central office leaders in these three districts did not feel that they had the time necessary to proceed with caution; they were expected to produce positive results quickly. There were major interruptions and disruptions. For example, “In all three districts, within four years of launching the reforms, the superintendents who had led the design of the initiatives left under pressure from their boards and local political leaders” (p. 81). The reasons for their departures were apparently based on their somehow offending elected officials or persuasive interest groups. The school boards committed to continuing the reforms when new leaders were hired, but the transition in leadership brought new agendas that weakened the promise to proceed with the reform work that was started. (p. 82).

The leadership of all three districts studied by Corcoran et al. (2001) asserted that they wanted all central office and school-based staff to ground their decision-making process on research evidence to better support and increase practices and programs that worked for students. While there was considerable investment of time and energy, efforts were hampered by an intense and pressure-packed reform environment, weak central office coordination and focus, conflicting research findings, reluctance to relinquish old ways of working, and disruption in leadership. Investment in programs and practices were not, for the most part, made on evidence; leaders acknowledged this as a weakness. The overall conclusion reached by Corcoran, et al. (2001) was that deep and abiding organizational cultural changes would be necessary for a district to be considered an evidence-driven highly coordinated educational system. However,

freedom from political and emotionally-driven behaviors that serve as impediments may well continue to negatively impact the capacity of districts to lead successful reforms.

Finnigan, Daly, and Che (2013) claimed that there had only been limited exploration undertaken to understand how the role of school district central offices either advance or obstruct the implementation of effective transformation. In this context, Finnigan, et al. conducted an exploratory study of how a mid-sized, low-performing urban district serving 34,000 students defined, acquired, used, and disseminated research evidence focused on school transformation. The study of this district and its schools found that educators, especially those who were school-based, defined evidence narrowly inasmuch as they focused primarily on students' test scores. Further, it appeared as if the large volume of research evidence was overwhelming too vast and resulted in little reflection on the credibility and usefulness of various types and sources of research. In addition, it was found that there was minimal distribution of research evidence to school-based leaders throughout the entire district. Finnigan et al. (2013) ascertained that while persons who were closely involved in reviewing research were influential in asserting opinions, they also may have obstructed the use of research evidence throughout the district's network because of the lack of connections between and among central office leaders and principals (pp. 490-491).

It was also apparent to Finnigan et al. (2013) that research was utilized in a superficial manner in that solutions for a problem were developed without bringing a variety of evidence to increase the level of understanding of the underlying dynamics that were contributing to the problem (p. 491). It was suggested that there was a basic capacity issue with many of the educators not having the requisite experience and skills to utilize research, understand contributory factors, or develop and implement complex solutions. Further, Finnigan et al.

suggested that these deficits combined with mistrust and skepticism about the relevance and utility of data and research must be addressed if evidence-based best practices are going to guide and influence decision making.

Honig and Coburn (2008) recognized the intense pressure that policy demands place on district central office educational leaders to comply with complex requirements associated with using evidence to ground and support teaching and learning improvement efforts. They identified important questions about what evidence use in district central office entails and requires (p. 579). Honig and Coburn (2008) conducted an extensive and comprehensive review of research literature on the use of evidence in school district central offices. After examining a large number of documents, they selected 151 to review in depth. All these pieces were considered as important, but Honig and Coburn eliminated a large percentage based on their judgment that they would not be helpful in understanding “. . . the empirical base on how district central offices may actually use evidence” (p. 584). They “. . . ended up with 52 books, peer-reviewed articles and academic conference papers that were empirical studies, literature reviews, or relatively rich descriptions of evidence use” (p. 584).

Honig and Coburn (2008) determined that the types of evidence used by district central office leaders to make decisions were broader than addressed in state or federal policy. Sources used by district central office leaders consisted of social science research, expert testimony, evaluation information, student performance data, practitioner knowledge and experience as well as the perspectives of parents and community members (pp. 586-588).

Based on their research, Honig and Coburn (2008) found that while district central office administrators used evidence for purposes related to improving school performance, they also tended to use that evidence for political purposes. They stated: “These other purposes may be

essential to basic district central office operations and may in fact enable central office administrators to use evidence in ways that promise to strengthen school performance” (p. 588). For example, an administrator may use evidence to build support within the central office, in schools, and in the broader community for certain improvement initiatives (Corcoran et al. 2001). It seems that when administrators, teachers, and school board members are provided with research, they are more likely to embrace the program recommended by the district central office leaders.

Honig and Coburn (2008) as well as Corcoran et al. (2001) advanced the notion that evidence is also used to confirm, justify, and defend the perspectives and opinions of those favoring certain approaches. Honig and Coburn (2008) determined that some individual district central office administrators “. . . may use evidence for the political purposes of advancing their own political gain rather than reform agendas” (p. 589). Further, it was revealed that some administrators were found to look for and utilize research findings when that evidence had the potential to address their individual interests.

Honig and Coburn (2008) explained that the use of research evidence is a complex process. They stated that, overall, the studies in their analysis suggested that the search process for research evidence proceeded rather haphazardly (p. 590). As is appropriate and expected, administrators searched internal and external sources for information, ideas and methods to improve and measure the progress of student performance in their respective districts. However, external searches seem to have focused on evidence that promised to increase the legitimacy of central office decisions (Corcoran et al., 2001). For example, a working relationship with an external research and development organization and the endorsement of that organization could

be quite persuasive in a board meeting where important decisions are supported (or not) for the investment of time and financial resources.

Honig and Coburn (2008) identified several additional factors that influenced the use of evidence by district central offices. The nature of the evidence itself was judged on 1) availability—obtainable without excessive difficulty; 2) accessibility—staff capacity and availability of technology; 3) ambiguity—open to interpretation in multiple reasonable ways; 4) credibility—trustworthy source, acceptable research design, sound methodology (pp. 594-596).

Another factor that influenced the use of evidence is the decision maker's working knowledge. Honig and Coburn (2008) stated that “. . . studies show that central office administrators will search for and pay greater attention to evidence that they can fit into their conceptions of what they already know and expect to find” (p. 596). Further, social capital has the potential to influence decision making. Social capital consists of formal and informal relationships with others, degree of trust, common beliefs and norms (pp596-597). In addition, the multiple demands and volume of responsibilities of district central office administrators combined with time constraints and loose connections between and among central office departments seem to limit significantly the use of evidence to improve teaching and learning.

As discussed earlier, district central office decision making is often driven by political considerations. Political dynamics characterized by unrest, instability and struggles for power, control, and influence can result in squandered time, lost opportunities, and damaged relationships. These factors can have a negative impact on the effective and efficient use of research and other sources of evidence. On the other hand, Honig and Coburn (2008) found that “. . . political debates and coalition-building can be part and parcel of evidence use in productive ways” (p. 599).

It was suggested by Honig and Coburn (2008) that policy makers could influence evidence use in a positive way by acknowledging and providing financial and other supports for essential sub activities. Other supports would consist of aiding in the search for evidence, participating in collaborative analytical sense-making, and funding professional development specialists across the entire district central office rather than only in research and evaluation departments. Honig and Coburn challenged state and federal policy makers to consider that “. . . it may be undesirable if not downright impossible to separate politics from evidence use. Policies might advance evidence use by not demonizing the use of evidence for political purposes but by reinforcing the importance of political means to school improvement ends” (p.603).

Honig (2013) argued that the exigent policies, strategies, and requirements of district central offices issued from both federal and state levels have not considered thoughtfully or adequately the capacity and work practices of district central office executives and staff. Her opinion was that “. . . such strategies generally tinker with surface changes and do not attend to the heart of the problem: the work practices and capacity of central office staff are ill-suited for supporting better student outcomes” (p. 2).

Honig (2013) stated that “Strategies to leverage central offices for improved academic results seem limited or incomplete. . . . they tinker with central office tasks and staffing rather than engage central offices in deeper changes in their practices and capacity that are necessary for improved teaching and learning district wide” (p. 3). To move forward in the transformation process, Honig (2013) identified three fundamental elements necessary to help schools build capacity for improved teaching and learning for all students. First, she advocated for more intensive partnerships between central office leaders and principals dominated by the perspective

that district central office personnel exist to assist schools to reach the goal of providing high quality, impactful instruction in every classroom for every student. Second, she promoted the redesign of central office functions to intentionally use diverse sources of data to identify and provide relevant services to schools to assist in building capacity for excellent teaching and learning. Finally, she advanced the notion that those central office leaders who function as transformation managers should continuously teach staff and help them learn from their experiences and, in so doing, build their capacity and skill as change agents (p. 4).

School District Leadership and Changing Demographics in Suburban Schools

Over the past several decades, suburban school district leaders have experienced significant demographic shifts. Frey (2011) authored a report that highlighted racial and ethnic changes in cities and metro suburbs during the 2000s. Data analysis from 1990, 2000, and 2010 decennial censuses showed that minorities (non-White) represented 35% of suburban residents. Specifically, the Black population residing in the suburbs rose from 37% in 1990 to 44% in 2000 and, most recently, to 51% in 2010. For the 2010-2011 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (n.d.) reported that Black students while White students comprised 54% of the student enrollment population. This evidence of demographic data showed that Black students occupied a significant number of seats in suburban classrooms.

In addition to the shifts in residential patterns throughout the United States, school policies have caused an increase in the number of Black students in suburban classrooms. Pogodzinski (2016) commented on how school choice policies, in states like Michigan and elsewhere, have eroded traditional residential boundaries. School choice was a policy designed to reduce segregated school districts. However, Pogodzinski (2016) maintained that the true impact on the distribution of students remains complicated. As an example, the author stated

that approximately 6% of children living in Detroit, Michigan attended schools in neighboring school districts, primarily in several inner-ring fringe districts—those that shared a border with Detroit. The influx of Detroit children made these districts more diverse. The response from residents and school officials to the flow of students from Detroit to these inner-ring or fringe suburban districts is not clear as studies have not been conducted. Pogodzinski (2016) indicated that those exiting Detroit are more likely to be Black and economically disadvantaged, while those exiting inner-ring fringe districts are more likely to be White and less economically disadvantaged.

Welton, Diem, and Holme (2015) examined the approaches used by school officials to adjust to the increased number of minority students attending suburban school districts. They uncovered color-blind (i.e. do not see race) and color-mute (i.e. do not talk about race) approaches, among others, practiced by school districts in efforts to manage diversification. The authors concluded that when issues of race and levels of discomfort about race are not directly addressed, more harm than good is the ultimate result. Welton et al. (2015) requested recognition that without a clear message and vision from top-level school district leaders about how to approach race-related issues in the face of demographic change, the matter of academic achievement gaps would not be adequately addressed. There was limited clarity from district-level leaders about how to provide and guide building-level leaders and teachers through culturally responsive leadership and instructional practices that would improve the outcomes for minority students. Welton et al. asserted that a framework for addressing such inequities, such as long-standing academic achievement gap between Black and White students, was essential to correct deficit-oriented norms and values. Central office leaders must purposefully and

intentionally cultivate, lead, encourage, and support principals in addressing matters that are based on race so that inequities, such as academic achievement gaps, do not continue to persist.

With more Black students attending traditionally majority White suburban schools, educational leaders and teachers should engage in practices to deepen their engagement in examining their own belief systems and values. Evans (2007) studied how school leaders make sense of race and demographic change in an effort to understand the educational environment for minority students: “The mere presence of African Americans in these suburban schools conjured up historical and socially constructed notions of their inferior status, which affected the identity and image of schools and school members” (p. 184). Further, Evans (2007) suggested that addressing the needs of a racially diverse student population, school district, and school leaders must actually “see” race, acknowledge sociopolitical signs and expressions of racism, and recognize the possibility of their own marginalization of others. Evans implied that only then, school leaders could engender new ideologies—a different belief system or philosophy—that are academically inclusive of all groups. Evans acknowledged that leaders applying the idea of sensemaking to the social construct or idea of race faced complexity related to deeply rooted values and personal interpretation.

Turner (2015) asserted that many American public-school systems faced three significant demographic shifts: (a) rising poverty, (b) a growing number of students from immigrant families, and (c) increasing populations of students of color. Turner argued that the ways that leaders of school districts and its schools responded to these shifts could substantially alter the school experience for millions of children. Further, Turner (2015) contended that school leaders often acted in insufficient ways for meeting the needs of these children, therefore not building on their potential. The researcher acknowledged that some scholars suggested that school districts

were crucial for improving and enhancing equity; however, little was known about how school district policymakers would react to these substantial demographic changes.

Turner (2015) concluded that, in reality, central office leaders and school board members could be powerful forces in policy development and implementation. Leaders could obtain equity for all students by avoiding the pitfalls of the ideology of cultural deficits. Leaders must also recognize the significance of implementing policies and practices that address the multiple factors that shape the school and life experiences of all students. Turner suggested that achieving better and more just schools would require altering the political context of school districts, which should embody diverse segments of the district central office, school-based faculty, and its staff. Leaders should take inclusionary steps to partner with families and community members invested in improving academic achievement and the overall lives of poor children of color and immigrant children to pay high dividends for all involved parties.

Chapter Summary

The research practitioner was not able to locate research focused on the role of central office educational leaders in addressing the lingering and persistent academic achievement gap between Black and White students in suburban high schools. From previously cited research (e.g., Frey, 2011), reliable data have shown significant demographic shifts that have changed the face of the school population in suburban school districts throughout the United States. Furthermore, some evidence has shown that the efforts of suburban school districts to make sense of demographic shifts in race and to respond in a culturally proficient manner have not worked (e.g., Evans, 2007; Turner, 2015).

This literature review showed that principal effectiveness, as related to student achievement, could depend on the quality and types of supports provided by the school districts’

central office administration (e.g., Brezicha et al., 2015; Burkhauser et al., 2012; Grove, 2002; Honig, 2012; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2004; Wallace Foundation, 2013; Waters & Marzano, 2006). While conducting the literature review, the research practitioner contemplated the potential differences among central office structures, functions, and practices in suburban school districts versus those in urban school districts. Literature was not found that focused on the impact of central office executive personnel on different school levels (i.e. elementary, middle and high schools) as related to the impact of addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Leaders developed the ESSA (1965) to close achievement gaps and address inequities in student learning outcomes (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2017). National data sets have shown the academic achievement gap between Black and White students persists despite the assiduous efforts of educators and politicians for decades to close this gap. Black students are under performing at astounding rates in math and reading in comparison to White students (e.g., NCES, 2018). With the increase of minority students as residents and students in suburban schools, evidence has shown that the academic achievement gap epidemic stretches beyond urban school districts.

The literature review revealed that numerous researchers have provided thoughtful, progressive, and bold, but realistic, strategies to increase substantially the capacity of central office leaders to transform teaching and learning practices throughout their districts. The message was clear: central office leadership matters (Corcoran, et al., 2001; Honig, 2013; Honig & Coburn, 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). In this era of high-stakes demands to access and utilize evidence to drive decision-making, school-based staff cannot impact the racial achievement gap (or any other student performance issues) absent deep, broad, and intense

involvement of central district office educators whose perspective is inclusive and collaborative. School-based leaders, faculty, and staff cannot do this complex work on their own. Whole-school reform is expected by policy makers, funding sources, parents, businesses leaders, community members and, most importantly, students.

Relevant literature was not found that defined the nature and addressed the impact that central office leadership supports, and practices could have on the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in suburban school communities. However, the research practitioner was inspired and has been convinced that the principles, approaches, strategies, and perspectives gleaned from the literature are, in all probability, transferable, and replicable in suburban schools. Therefore, the research practitioner aimed and aspired to add to the existing body of research literature. For this research study, an exploratory case study methodology was utilized to provide a holistic, in-depth exploration to identify and establish the central office leadership supports and practices that would effectively address the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in a suburban high school.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The methodology and design of case study research has been described in this chapter. This methodology was utilized to conduct an exploratory case study focusing on how central office leadership practices supported and addressed a suburban high school with an academic achievement gap between Black and White students, as evidenced by state level assessment data. An exploratory case study methodology was utilized to provide a holistic and in-depth exploration that identified and described how a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment (DIA), and a director of special education (SPED) provided job-embedded support to a high school that experienced an academic achievement gap.

In this chapter, this research practitioner articulated the study's problem statement and research questions as well as the principles of case study design and research trustworthiness. The research practitioner detailed the study's research techniques. Descriptions were provided of data collection tools, data analysis methods, and research ethics as aligned with the research questions against the backdrop of these methodological principles of case study research.

Problem Statement

Student enrollment data in the United States have shown that Black students are learners in majority White suburban schools. For the 2010-2011 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (n.d.) reported the enrollment data based on race/ethnicity and locale. Black students comprised approximately 14% of the student enrollment population in suburban schools, while White students comprised 54% of the student enrollment population (NCES, n.d.).

Chubb and Loveless (2004) identified that in 1966, a team of federally sponsored researchers conducted the first comprehensive study of student achievement which identified a

large achievement gap between Black and White students (p. 1). This achievement gap continues in today's schools. In reference to achievement data in suburban schools, a prime example of the current gap between Black and White students is exemplified by the outcome of the Spring 2019 Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) data in one suburban Michigan county. From reviewing an online student data portal (www.mischooldata.org), 40.9% of White students in this specific county demonstrated a proficiency rate of meeting or exceeding bench marks for the math portion of the SAT test, while only 8.4% of Black students met or exceeded the math bench marks. In regards to the portion of the test that is focused on evidence based reading and writing, only 24.8% of Black students met or exceeded the bench marks, while 60.4% of their White counterparts met or exceeded the bench marks. These types of data have shown support for the imperative need for effective educational leadership that addresses the academic disparities that continue to persist in our American education system. Datnow and Castellano (2001) asserted, "It is axiomatic that strong leadership is critical for successful whole-school reform" (p. 219). Central office leaders and building level leaders must move forward to tackle these gaps in a coherent, effective, and sustainable manner to narrow or eliminate the disparity in the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Research Questions

This research practitioner contributed to existing research by exploring how central office leadership practices supported a suburban high school experiencing an academic achievement gap between Black and White students, as evidenced by state level assessment data.

Therefore, the following research questions directed the exploratory case study:

1. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*
2. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?*
3. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students within a suburban high school?*
4. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

Research Design: Case Study

Case study research refers to an intense investigation and exploration of a single individual, a situation, an organization, or a phenomenon. The primary purpose of case study research is to conduct an intense exploration of a bounded system that is connected, integrated and complex (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Unlike experiments, the contextual conditions are not controlled but are part of the investigation. Stake (1995) described case study research as “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The research practitioner used the case study research design to identify and explore the central office leadership supports and practices provided for in a suburban high school that endeavored to close the academic achievement gap.

Case study principles involve a design that is flexible and allows for changes to be made throughout the research process. The research practitioner expected that the study would be

iterative, which led to the refinement of the research study at the conceptual level to carry out the exploratory case study (Stake, 1995). Multiple rounds of data analyses were conducted to provide the most in-depth and accurate data so that the research questions were properly addressed.

Based on the research study questions, the research practitioner used three qualitative methods to carry out the study. The data collected from interviews, observations, and documents were analyzed simultaneously to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the case. The data collection process and analysis were ongoing; therefore, the research practitioner extended and deepened the understanding of the case and enhanced the confidence of the findings. Maxwell (2013) emphasized, “The data in a qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study” (p.84).

The research practitioner began data analysis procedures by reading slowly through the collected data to garner a general understanding. The next steps involved coding and categorizing to create themes. The research practitioner used coding to make sense of the collected data. The data were then categorized, ordered, and examined for connections and patterns to provide in-depth explanations that addressed the research questions. These procedures indicated findings that provided an overall understanding of the case through answering the research questions (Creswell, 2016).

In qualitative studies, a researcher’s subjectivity and bias may pose risks to the trustworthiness of a study. Throughout the research process, the research practitioner ensured a trustworthy research study was conducted. The research practitioner provided an accurate description of the case by employing a thorough data collection and analysis process. The criterion for evaluating trustworthiness in qualitative research is credibility, dependability,

transferability, conformability, and confirmability (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014).

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) identified credibility as the verification procedure that “refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (p. 112). Member checks and peer debriefings were conducted as additional steps to control bias. Member checks were conducted by sending transcribed interviews and summaries to the research participants for review. Peer debriefings were discussions of findings with critical colleagues to ensure careful analysis and examination of data were completed. Triangulation of data collection from multiple sources also strengthened credibility (Merriam, 2002). The research practitioner triangulated collected data from interviews, direct observations, and document analysis to control bias and provide clarity.

Dependability verifies if the results are consistent with the data that is collected. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) affirmed that dependability “refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data” (p. 113). Similar to dependability is confirmability, the degree to which results are neutral and accurate (Houghton et al., 2013). The research practitioner kept an electronic case study data collection protocol and procedures record to provide evidence of the case study process. The utilization of NVivo 12, a data storage and analysis software tool, ensured both dependability and confirmability. NVivo 12 served as an electronic audit trail by recording the data analysis decisions made throughout the process.

Transferability is the degree to which the research findings can be generalized to other contexts. According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the concept of thick description enhances both transferability and credibility. The research practitioner provided thick descriptions to

communicate a holistic, accurate, and realistic description of context, participants, experiences, and observations to help readers contextualize meaning from the case study findings. Merriam (2002) identified that thick description “involves providing an adequate database, that is, enough description and information that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match, and thus whether findings can be transferred” (p. 29).

Conformability is the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the participants of the study and not the researcher’s biases (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). The research practitioner assumed an investigative role and acted as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis throughout this case study project. This type of role might have generated bias throughout the research process. As suggested by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), in addition to member checks and peer debriefings, the research practitioner’s biases were monitored throughout the research process and recorded as reflections in the field notes. The digital reflexive research journal that contained personal reflections and discussions about potential biases was utilized throughout the data collection and analysis process. In addition, electronic records were maintained that detailed the data collection protocols and procedures.

Conceptual Framework of the Case Study

A conceptual framework provides the researcher’s map of the topic being explored. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) assert, “A conceptual framework explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied – the key factors, variable, or constructs – and the presumed interrelationships among them” (p. 20). The central office practices set forth by Honig (2012) provided the conceptual lens through which this study was conducted. She identified essential central office supports and practices as focusing on joint work, modeling effective behavior, developing and using tools, acting as a broker and creating and sustaining social

engagement. The author defined these key factors as important for central office administration to support effectively building-level principals. These key factors allowed the research practitioner to explore and gain a deeper understanding of the central office practices and supports present in the school district that was studied. As suggested by Honig (2012), the following provides explanations of central office leadership supports and practices:

- Joint work: collaborative activities where both parties take responsibility for the work;
- Modeling: involves demonstrating the expected behavior and expectations as opposed to directing verbally an individual's actions;
- Developing and Utilizing Tools: assist the principal and central office administrators to engage consistently in agreed-upon protocols and practices;
- Acting as broker: requires bringing in new ideas, programs and other resources to advance the goals of the school and the school district; and
- Create and sustain social engagement: through conversations with others, individuals discuss the meaning of new information and how to integrate into work practices. (Honig, 2012, pp. 739–741)

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) acknowledged that a conceptual framework contains the researcher's passion, which helps justify in part the argument that one seeks to construct and defend as the basis of his or her study. The literature review revealed a gap in understanding how central office leaders can provide effective support for chronically failing suburban schools, populated by a relatively large Black student populations whose mean student performance lags behind that of the White student populations. In summary, this study sought to address the aforementioned academic achievement gap fueled by a passionate social reconstructionist response. The argument endeavored to establish concrete evidence of how central office leaders can support building leaders in strengthening local school capacity to improve the student achievement of Black students in a suburban high school.

Table 1, on page 51, illustrates the methodological approach as to how the conceptual framework was carried out. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) argue that conceptual frameworks

ensure researchers carry out rigorous studies. The authors set forth the idea that “(t)he conceptual framework guides the ways in which you think about collecting, analyzing, describing and interpreting your data” (p. 17). The authors also argue that conceptual frameworks evolve and are dynamic as the study is carried out (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

With this understanding, as the study proceeded, the research practitioner adjusted the utilization of the research instruments to establish and confirm deeper understandings of the case. Although the visual of the methodological framework (Table 1) appears to be linear, multiple iterations occurred due to a growing understanding and development of the case over the course of the study. Miles et al. (2014) confirmed that conceptual frameworks and methodological approaches are fluid and evolve as the study progresses to establish a deep understanding of the case. Throughout the course of the study, the research practitioner engaged in multiple cycles of data analysis, reflection, and adjustments. These various cycles allowed the research practitioner to answer and address the research questions of interest through multiple sources of data and iterative rounds of analyses.

Table 1

Methodology Framework

Research questions	Research techniques	Data collection sources and techniques	Data analysis techniques	Criterion for trustworthiness and control/monitoring strategies
1. How do central office leaders, namely a Superintendent, a Director of Instruction and Assessment, and a Director of Special Education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?	Qualitative • Key Informant Interviews • Direct Observations • Documentation Review	• Open and Semi-Structured Questions • Descriptive and Reflective Field Notes • Document Summary Form	• Between-methods Triangulation • Open and Axial Coding • Developing Themes	• Credibility: Member checks, Peer Debriefings, Between-methods Triangulation • Dependability & Confirmability: Data Collection Protocols, Audit Trail • Transferability: Thick Descriptions • Conformability: Member Checks, Peer Debriefings, Reflexive Journal • Reactivity: Reflexive Journal
2. How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?	Qualitative • Key Informant Interviews • Direct Observations • Documentation Review	• Open and Semi-Structured Questions • Descriptive and Reflective Field Notes • Document Summary Form	• Between-Methods Triangulation • Open and Axial Coding • Developing Themes	• Credibility: Member checks, Peer Debriefings, Between-Methods Triangulation • Dependability & Confirmability: Data Collection Protocols, Audit Trail • Transferability: Thick Descriptions • Conformability: Member Checks, Peer Debriefings, Reflexive Journal • Reactivity: Reflexive Journal
3. How do central office leaders identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in a suburban high school?	Qualitative • Key Informant Interviews • Direct Observations • Documentation Review	• Open and Semi-Structured Questions • Descriptive and Reflective Field Notes • Document Summary Form	• Between-Methods Triangulation • Open and Axial Coding • Developing Themes	• Credibility: Member checks, Peer Debriefings, Between-Methods Data Triangulation • Dependability & Confirmability: Data Collection Protocols, Audit Trail • Transferability: Thick Descriptions • Conformability: Member Checks, Peer Debriefings, Reflexive Journal • Reactivity: Reflexive Journal
4. How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?	Qualitative • Key Informant Interviews • Direct Observations • Documentation Review	• Open and Semi-Structured Questions • Descriptive and Reflective Field Notes • Document Summary Form	• Between-Methods Triangulation • Open and Axial Coding • Developing Themes	• Credibility: Member checks, Peer Debriefings, Between-Methods Data Source Triangulation • Dependability & Confirmability: Data Collection Protocols, Audit Trail • Transferability: Thick Descriptions • Conformability: Member Checks, Peer Debriefings, Reflexive Journal • Reactivity: Reflexive Journal

Research Techniques

Ravitch and Carl (2016) asserted that a researcher should employ multiple sources of evidence to carry out the process of between-methods triangulation, a technique that enhances the confidence and trustworthiness of the research study. These authors cited Denzin (1970/2009) to confirm that between-methods triangulation contributes to establishing a robust data set. Key informant interviews, direct observations, and document reviews were identified as the three specific methods utilized to conduct this study. Creswell (2013) asserted that there are multiple forms of data resources needed to develop an extensive understanding of a bounded system (p. 98). These sources allowed for between-methods data triangulation that provided confidence in the findings. The implementation and concurrent analysis of the three data methods provided comprehensive insights into the central office practices that supported the high school featured in this case study.

Key informant interviews. The research practitioner conducted key informant interviews to investigate participants' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, thoughts, perceptions, and ideas related to the research questions. With permission from the participants, the interviews were audio recorded for purposes of generating transcripts of the interviews and for cross-referencing. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2017), key informant interviews involve asking questions of primary case study participants whose expertise, knowledge and opinions provide important insights regarding the research questions. The research practitioner used active listening to engage with participants in an interview and dig deeper to pursue emergent issues. To ensure relevant data were collected, four semi-structured interview questions were utilized as the foundation of the interviews to establish focus and direction (see Appendix B).

When necessary, the research practitioner used open and unstructured questioning to gain more in-depth data based on each individual's responses to the questions.

Direct observations. Direct observation is a data collection technique that allows a researcher to examine individuals' activities in natural settings without influencing the behavior of the individuals (Given, 2016). According to Taylor-Powell and Steele (1996), seeing and listening are key to observations. Observations allow researchers to see and record firsthand the activities that are taking place. Ravitch and Carl (2016) proclaimed, "Qualitative observational research explores and describes the meditating contexts on behavior, attitudes, beliefs and interactions, including organizational, relational, and cultural knowledge(s)" (p. 160).

The opportunity to engage in an observation occurred during the study. This data-collection method was employed by the research practitioner to cross-check and interpret findings gained from other data sources (see Appendix D). The research practitioner observed a school board meeting to glean additional data to formulate a holistic and comprehensive understanding of the case. The research practitioner used this observation to provide thick descriptions to supply context and clarify meaning during the data analysis process. The direct observation of the school board meeting provided more opportunities to document activities, behavior and physical aspects without having to depend on the participants' willingness and ability to respond to questions. Insights gained from the study were contextualized through this direct observation because the research practitioner had the opportunity to observe people in a natural setting.

Document reviews. The research practitioner reviewed documents to provide context and history to understand better the complexities of the case. The documents revealed norms, culture, values, and beliefs that were not captured through the observation and interviews.

Merriam (2002) stated, “The strength of documents as a data source lies with the fact that they already exist in the situation; they do not intrude upon or alter the setting in ways that presence of the investigator might” (p. 13). The collection and examination of documents encompassed academic course information, professional learning community data collection tools, and strategic improvement planning documents. These items assisted with answering this study’s research questions (see Appendix D). The research practitioner reviewed and analyzed documents to enrich the context and provide a more in-depth and comprehensive data analysis outcome. In addition, the research practitioner reviewed documents to find clues and information pertaining to the matters and issues present that could assist in preparing thoroughly for interviews and observations.

Data Collection Techniques

Case selection: Purposeful sampling. This case study research was based on purposeful sampling. The process of conducting a case study was initiated with a purposeful selection of a case. Merriam (2002) explained, “The selection is done purposefully, not randomly; that is, a particular person, site, program, process, community, or other bounded system is selected because it exhibits characteristics of interest to the researcher” (p. 179). A school district located in a suburban area in the Midwest was selected for this case study, and the practice of purposeful sampling was used in this research site to derive accurate, meaningful, and useful data. The research practitioner selected district level and school level leaders who could provide significant insights that would cultivate a robust data set. The research practitioner identified a relevant observation opportunity and reviewed pertinent documents (e.g., the annual School Improvement Plans), demographic data, and state level student assessment data gathered from MI School Data (2019), the Michigan Department of Education’s (2015) official public online portal. In

identifying the element of research bias, it is essential to stipulate that the research practitioner served previously as the principal of this high school. Although this past affiliation did not serve as the primary reason, it did serve as a contributing factor to the selection of the school high school in the study.

Approximately 500 students attended the high school in the district at the time of this study. The student population was approximately 65% Black and 27% White. At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, the high school was identified as a Priority school by the Michigan Department of Education (2017). Based on 5 years of annual state standardized testing of 11th graders, the results placed this high school in the bottom 5% of schools in the state of Michigan. Based on 2013-2014 state standardized data, the high school raised its ranking to the 25th percentile statewide. In August 2015, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) notified the district that its high school was no longer identified as a Priority school. The academic gap between Black students and White students, despite improvements, continued to persist based on the scores from the annual SAT and Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP). For the 2019 SAT test, 70.7% of White students demonstrated proficiency on the evidence-based reading and writing portion of the test. Only 31% of Black students demonstrated proficiency. For math, 29.3% of White students performed at proficiency, while less than 10% of Black students exhibited proficiency.

Merriam (2002) highlighted, “To begin purposive sampling, you first determine what criteria are essential in choosing who is to be interviewed, or what sites are to be observed” (p. 12). Participants in the study included several key participants employed by the school district who had direct associations with the high school. The individuals were the superintendent, director of instruction and assessment (DIA), director of special education (SPED), the high

school principal, and the assistant principal (APrin). The superintendent is regarded as the top administrator and manager of a school district and is the only direct supervisee of the school board. The DIA provided leadership to Grades K–12 for the planning, evaluation, and implementation of curricula and programs in the district, including special programs, funding, staffing requirements, and curriculum implementation. The SPED provided leadership and oversight of planning, implementing, directing, and maintaining the district's special education programs and services in compliance with federal, state, and local guidelines. The high school principal utilized leadership, supervisory, and administrative skills to promote and enhance the educational development of each student. This person served as the chief administrator of the school and was responsible for developing and implementing policies, programs, curriculum activities, and budgets in a manner that promoted the educational development of each student and the professional growth and development of each staff member. The assistant principal supported the building principal in the development and continuous implementation of the high school programming, advanced the educational well-being of students, guided student management procedures, supervised and evaluated staff members.

Based on each person's role in the selected school district, the individuals provided information and insights to address the study's research questions. Each person's job function impacted directly the high school's instructional and academic achievement outcomes.

Instruments and protocols. The creation and consistent utilization of data collection instruments and protocols occurred throughout the data collection process during interviews, the observation, and review of documents. Ravitch and Carl (2016) contended, "Qualitative data collection should be intentional, rigorous and systemic; it should not be guided by overly rigid rules and procedures" (p. 145). The research practitioner used between-methods triangulation of

data collection sources to provide multiple measures to address the research questions and ensure that an in-depth and contextualized case study occurred (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The research practitioner strengthened the credibility of the case study by triangulating the data collection sources.

In case study methodology, the research practitioner was the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis. Research biases were addressed by the research practitioner to ensure that a credible study was conducted. The research practitioner served as the primary instrument for data collection for this case study. The research practitioner continuously self-reflected, identified, and monitored biases throughout the study. These action steps were documented in a digital reflexive journal to record subjectivities, experiences, ideas, challenges, and breakthroughs. The research practitioner triangulated data from multiple sources, conducted member checks, and engaged in peer reviews to control research bias and strengthen research credibility.

Initially, semi-structured interview questions and a specific interview process were utilized as the tool to elicit specific responses from the participants (see Appendix C). The research practitioner probed further into a respondent's comments with unstructured, open-ended questions during the semi-structured interviews when appropriate and necessary. Responses from the interview questions were recorded and stored in electronic Microsoft Word documents. In addition, the research practitioner sought consent from the participants to record digitally the interview for later transcription. The data pieces gleaned from interviews have been deemed as essential in qualitative studies. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated, "Interview transcripts are of central concern as a hallmark of qualitative data; they are most often viewed as necessary to rigorous data collection and analysis" (p. 159).

A field note template was the data collection source to record information gained from key informant interviews and the observation (see Appendix D). Creswell (2016) identified two types of field notes. The first type is “reflective,” which is described as notes about experiences, hunches, and learnings—inferences made beyond the data. The second type is “descriptive.” This type involved notes about what happened and observed in as neutral a manner as possible. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that field notes “allow for the researcher to see and record firsthand the activities in which the case participants are engaged in the context(s) in which these activities happen” (p. 160). For this case study, the research practitioner reviewed field notes over time to build and gain insight into the contexts and realities of the case, as well as code for possible themes. Ravitch and Carl (2006) indicated that the lack of recorded observations, thoughts, and field notes equated to an investigator not having data for a qualitative research study.

Document summary forms were utilized as a data collection source in the research practitioner’s case study (see Appendix E). The research practitioner used information on the forms to create an annotated bibliography and to ensure the documents remained organized and readily accessible. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) suggested that document summary forms would be useful in collating and organizing information to address the research questions. The research practitioner collected data from the documents to obtain authentic evidence in a timely, inexpensive and unobtrusive manner.

When collecting data for this study, the research practitioner considered how to assemble and store the data so that the data analysis process remained efficient. Baxter and Jack (2008) recommended developing a computerized process to organize and manage the vast amount of data collected. The research practitioner utilized two different tools. A personal laptop was

utilized to access Microsoft Word to record, save, and organize the data collected from the multiple resources. The second tool was the NVivo 12 data analysis software tool. Interview transcripts, observation notes, and documents were stored in NVivo 12 to code data and carry out the analysis process in an organized and efficient manner.

Data Analysis

In case study, the data analysis process is defined as taking something apart (Stake, 1995). By dissecting the multiple pieces of evidence collected and employing between-methods triangulation, the research practitioner searched for patterns to construct meaning during the data analysis process. Throughout the process, the research practitioner used between-methods triangulation by utilizing and analyzing data from the interviews, direct observations, and the document analysis to ensure credibility. The research practitioner triangulated the three data sources to develop converging lines of inquiry while formulating themes and responses to the research questions.

The process of data analysis, as discussed by Creswell and Poth (2018), began with the analysis of the raw data, forming the data into codes, and then combining those codes into broader themes. The research practitioner uploaded the data gathered from the interviews, direct observations, and the document analysis into NVivo 12 to carry out the data analysis process. Codes were labeled that assigned symbolic meaning to descriptive and inferential information gathered during the study. Open coding, the initial round of coding, was the process that assisted in noticing patterns and, therefore, generated labels for phenomena identified in data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). By carefully reading interview transcripts, analyzing field notes, and examining document summaries, the research practitioner assigned codes to data chunks. This process allowed the research practitioner to condense the bulk of information into

analyzable units of data. The open coding process involved multiple rounds which developed and formulated emerging patterns, categories and themes.

Open coding preceded axial coding, a process that identified codes that were clustered around points of intersection and related codes. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated that axial coding “is a process of going from coding chunks of data to starting to see how these codes come together into coding categories or clusters from which you will situate sets of constructs or concepts in relation to each other to make arguments and develop findings” (p. 250). By utilizing the developed codes from the open coding process, the research practitioner applied critical thinking skills and inductive and deductive reasoning to develop themes, summaries, or categories. This process called for the research practitioner to further condense large amounts of data into smaller units of data and assisted in formulating a cognitive map that provided a visual of data interactions that addressed the research questions.

By interpreting the themes that evolved from the open coding and axial coding processes, the research practitioner supported the formulation of the analytic themes. Through an iterative process of examining and analyzing the codes, the research practitioner articulated the themes that emerged, which represented the case study’s core explanations and findings. Creswell (2016) indicated that themes represent the major findings in a study and present evidence for answering the research questions.

A comprehensive, exploratory case study report was authored based on the evidence and findings from this case study. The research practitioner used the themes to provide in-depth descriptions that assisted in answering the research questions. In writing the report, the research practitioner described the detailed process used for data collection and data analysis in order for ;

readers to independently assess the quality and consistency of the reported inferences. In addition, recommendations for future research were identified and discussed.

Research Bias and Ethics

The research practitioner recognized that the goals of the research project were aligned with her primary career objectives and journey. During the span of her 19-year career, she has served as an education practitioner in five public school districts in Southeastern Michigan. She has been a teacher, basketball coach, athletic director, assistant principal, principal, and assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction. The research practitioner previously was the principal of the suburban high school that was selected for this research study project. Due to the dual roles of researcher and practitioner, this research practitioner identified research bias and monitored it throughout the case study. Previously in this chapter, strategies were discussed to identify control and monitor research bias.

Due to the research practitioner's involvement in the study, it was essential to identify another potential threat to the trustworthiness of the proposed case study. Reactivity, an element that cannot be eliminated, is the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied (Maxwell, 2013). The research practitioner understood that the element of reactivity should be identified, controlled, and effectively utilized. Through transparent reflective journaling, the research practitioner communicated how her actions, values, emotions, preferences, and biases potentially influenced the research process.

In an appropriate and diligent fashion, the research practitioner employed ethical research principles throughout the course of this exploratory case study. These principles required the research practitioner to seek voluntary participation, obtain informed consent from each participant, maintain confidentiality, and protect anonymity. The research practitioner secured

the data and protected the anonymity of all participants in the study. The names of participants were not disclosed. The confidentiality of all collected raw data was closely guarded by the research practitioner. Official authorization from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Michigan—Flint was obtained by properly completing the required application. The necessary and appropriate documentation for the consent letters has been provided in the appendices of this proposal (see Appendix A).

Chapter Summary

This chapter identified and described an exploratory case study research design that was implemented to provide an accurate, holistic, and in-depth exploration of the impact central office leadership supports and practices have on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in a suburban high school, as evidenced by state level student assessment data. The purposeful selection process of the case for this study was described. The iterative research process assisted in the development of meaning and clarity to thoroughly address each of the research questions as well as patterns across the research questions. The data collection sources were interviews, observations, and document reviews. The utilization of data collection instruments and protocols were described to ensure consistency and fidelity in the collection of data. The between-methods triangulation of the three data sources provided the research practitioner the opportunity to conduct a data analyses process that provided accurate in-depth descriptions that assisted in answering the research questions. Throughout the study, the criteria for evaluating research trustworthiness were addressed through various strategies. There were explanations of strategies that controlled and monitored bias. The chapter concluded with a discussion of ethical research principles.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore specific central office leadership supports and practices linked to addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in a suburban high school. This chapter has contained a more in-depth description of the implementation of the data analysis procedure described in Chapter 3. The chapter also provided a presentation of the results of the study, organized by research questions.

Case Study Principles

According to Hancock and Algozzine (2017), case study research is an intensive analyses and exploration of a system bounded by time and space (p. 9). Furthermore, the authors state, “Through case studies, researchers hope to gain in-depth understanding of situations and meaning for those involved” (p. 10). In this study, the bounded system was one suburban high school and the district central office overseeing that high school. In accordance with case study principles, the research questions were formulated to facilitate the identification and exploration of the central office leadership supports and practices that were provided for a suburban high school to address the academic achievement gap.

Creswell (2013) advised that there are several essential forms of data sources needed to develop an in-depth understanding of a bounded system (p. 98). The data collection instruments utilized in this case study were interviews, an observation and document reviews. These sources allowed for between-methods triangulation that supported the development of a comprehensive understanding of the district central office that supported the high school. The triangulation of the multiple sources of data increased the trustworthiness of the study and enhanced confidence in the findings.

Demographics

Study school. During the 2006-2007 school year, the high school in this case study started to experience a shift in demographics due to more Black families choosing to attend this high school because their neighborhood schools were not academically sound and safe. With a current enrollment of approximately 500 students, this high school's student population is 65% Black (see Table 1: Race and Ethnicity of Student Population). It was once highly populated by White students. Over the last few years, an increasing number of White families have elected to send their children to other surrounding school districts. Although the student demographics have changed, the demographics of the current staff remain majority White at the building and central office locations. The current staff and faculty of the high school is composed of 29 teachers, two counselors, one social worker, one district psychologist, one assistant principal, and one principal. One of the individuals is a Black teacher. The central office leaders consist of three individuals who are White. Table 2 indicates the racial and ethnic composition of the student population by percentages.

Table 2

Racial and Ethnic Composition of the Student Population

Grade Level	American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian American	Black or African American	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	White	Hispanic or Latino	Multi-Racial
9	0%	1%	67%	0%	28%	2%	2%
10	0%	0%	81%	0%	12%	2%	6%
11	1%	1%	64%	0%	26%	3%	4%
12	0%	2%	50%	0%	41%	2%	5%
TOTAL	0%	1%	65%	0%	27%	2%	4%

Study participants. Interviews were conducted with three central office leaders and two school leaders. The central office leaders (COLs) in this study consisted of one superintendent, one director of instruction and assessment (DIA), and one special education director (SPED). School leaders in the study consisted of one principal and one assistant principal (APrin). The following subsections provide descriptions of the participants.

Superintendent. The superintendent has been working in education for 25 years. He is serving his 24th year in the school district around which this case study is centered. He started his career at the high school as an English teacher. After his fifth year, he was hired as the AP for the building and remained in that position for five years. He moved on to become an elementary school principal within the district. After his principalship, he moved into central office as the human resources director. He was named the superintendent of the school district in May, 2016.

Director of instruction and assessment. In 2001, the DIA started his teaching career in Las Vegas, Nevada where he was a high school math teacher. He moved to his current home state where he continued teaching math at the secondary level in a small community. After six years of teaching in this community, he accepted a job in a larger district as the instructional technology director for the school district. In 2010, he started as the instructional technology director for this school district. In 2011, his role evolved into his current title of DIA.

Director of special education. With over 30 years of professional experience, the SPED started her career as an elementary teacher and transitioned into a special education teacher at the elementary and secondary levels. She then moved into being the director of a vocational technical center in the district where she started her career. She took a position in a large school district where she worked as a special education supervisor and later became the SPED. As her

career evolved, she moved into other districts as a special education director and informational technology supervisor. She has been serving in her current role in the school district since 2016. As she is approaching retirement, she is currently working part-time.

Principal. The principal's entire educational career has been in the current school district. In 1999, he started as a social studies teacher. After approximately five years, he was appointed Dean of Students. Due to district cutbacks, he returned to the classroom five years later. In 2014, he became the assistant principal. In 2016, he became the principal of the high school.

Assistant principal. The assistant principal has served in education for over 20 years. She started her career at the high school as an English and social studies teacher. Within the building, she has held additional positions, such as curriculum leader and department chair. She started as the APrin in 2016.

Data Sources for Between-Methods Triangulation

The research practitioner collected data from two additional sources to carry out between-methods triangulation with the interview data. The first additional data source was a set of observation notes made during a school board meeting. Topics were discussed that were relevant to this study. The second additional data source was a review of official, publicly available district documents. The following sub-sections are descriptions of those data sources.

Observation notes. The research practitioner's opportunity to make observations was limited to one school board meeting. Other meetings at the school or district level regarding topics relevant to this study were restricted to authorized district personnel. The school board meeting at which the research practitioner made observation notes was held on the evening of November 20, 2019 at the district's central office building. The meeting was open to the public. The duration of the relevant part of the meeting was 23 minutes. The DIA who provided

interview data for this study presented a summary of the results of Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (MSTEP) standardized test from the spring 2019 testing cycle (2018-2019 school year). This topic was relevant to the present study because the MSTEP results were presented to the school board as indicators of students' academic outcomes. Standardized tests were also used in the district as a means of assessing and monitoring the achievement gaps. The school board meeting was an opportunity for the research practitioner to observe how the subject of race was addressed in or omitted from public conversation about student performance in the district.

Observation notes were made during the meeting on a laptop in a Microsoft Word document. The Word document was a direct observation field note-taking template (see Appendix D). Noted on the form were the date, time, duration, and location of the observation. The notes made on the form identified the topic of the relevant portion of the school board meeting and the role of the DIA in presenting the test-data summary to the school board. Observation notes were recorded in a table with two columns. The left-hand column was for descriptive observations about the details of what occurred during the observation. The right-hand column was for reflective notes about inferences beyond the descriptive data.

Document review. Five publicly available district documents were reviewed as a third source of data for triangulation. Information about the documents were recorded on a document data collection form (see Appendix E). The five documents were: (1) District Improvement Plan (DIP) 2019-2020; (2) School Improvement Plan (SIP) 2019-2020; (3) Annual Education Report (AER); (4) Overview of African American Male Reading Support Course; and (5) Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Data Talks Analysis Worksheet for math and English Language Arts (ELA). Although the five documents were publicly available, they were created as top-

down communications from district or school leadership to teachers. Reviewing these documents gave the research practitioner an opportunity to triangulate direct evidence of leadership communication practices in the district with the practices described by participants during their interviews.

Data Analysis Procedure

The research practitioner was deeply engaged with the dataset by carrying out three different phases of data analysis. The first phase involved listening to the audio-recordings multiple times while taking notes to assist with understanding and making sense of the dataset as it related to the study's research questions. After several rounds of listening to the audio-recordings, the research practitioner utilized the Rev.com transcription service to ensure accurate, verbatim transcripts of the audio-recordings. The transcripts were reviewed several times by the research practitioner for accuracy while listening again to the audio-recordings. Observation notes and archival documents used for data triangulation were already available in Microsoft Word format.

Utilizing the interview and observation transcripts in addition to the archival documents, the second phase of data analysis involved the research practitioner's employing Microsoft Word tools to highlight text and embed notes in the transcripts to further assist in organizing and making sense of the data. Data from each source were read based on each research question to ensure the research practitioner was focused on drawing connections within the data to answer the study's research questions. To assist in making the researcher's thoughts "visible" and accessible, a mental concept map was constructed for each research question based on the notes. Appendix F provided documentation pertaining to this phase of the data analysis process. After

several iterative rounds of this type of data analysis, the research practitioner was ready to proceed to the next phase of the data analysis process by utilizing NVivo 12 software.

For the third phase of data analysis, interview transcripts, observation notes, and archival documents were uploaded into NVivo 12 software so the research practitioner could code data and further carry out the data analysis process. The utilization of NVivo allowed for a more robust analysis of the dataset, and it was utilized to confirm and deepen the data analysis carried out in the previous phases. The process of analysis began with an initial round of open coding, as recommended by Miles et al. (2014). The purpose of open coding was to reduce the dataset into small, manageable chunks of data. The researcher read and reread the interview and observation transcripts to facilitate the reduction of data to manageable chunks. Each chunk of data was placed in an NVivo child node, which was labeled when a phrase or group of consecutive phrases indicated an idea or theme relevant to the study's purpose and research questions. The child node represented an initial code. When another chunk of data from the same transcript or a different transcript expressed a similar theme or idea, that chunk was placed in the same child node. In this way, data were sorted into initial codes. On the following pages, Table 3 indicates the initial codes that emerged during initial coding from the three data resources. Initial codes in Table 3 are organized by participant.

Table 3 *Data Analysis Initial Codes*

Data source 1: Interview participants	Initial codes developed from participants' data
Assistant principal	Ability to provide support classes, Advocating for culturally relevant literature, Discussions in meetings, District admins supportive but have different focus, Grant funding for math enrichment classes, Need for more social and emotional resources for students, Reading support classes, Role of District Admins to ask what's needed and provide resources, Support for teacher professional development.
Director of instruction and assessment	Additional supports for reading, Administrative meetings and walk throughs, Assuring district improvement plan is in alignment with the school improvement plan., Challenges in working on behalf of schools, Charlotte Danielson evaluation tool, Creating building level teams for multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), Grant funding for math enrichment classes, Ideal MTSS programming, Impacts of systems thinking, Making unpopular decisions, More kids identified for services than district able to serve, MTSS committee meetings, Multi-day training on collaborative teams for professional learning community (PLC) system, Negotiating technology rollout with iPads, Purpose of PLCs, Restorative practices, Wearing a lot of hats.
Director of special education	Administrative meetings for MTSS, Collaborating with counselors, Collaborative teaching and drop-in rooms, Developing online data repository, Dissent over specific protocol-model, District training for crisis prevention institute (CPI), Evidence of effective interventions, Fostering relationship-based discipline, Goals of MTSS, Hiring as practice with the greatest effect on gap, Issues with formulas handed down by State department, Lack of receptivity by principals, Observing-providing resources, Setting up transition plans-services, So far so good on drop in room, Student need for role models.
Principal	Determination to have advanced placement (AP)-honors English classes, Discussing data and college test prep, Discussions in meetings, District admins supportive but have different focus, Ideal for superintendent to have office in each school-greater involvement, Impact of Character Education Program, Negotiating culturally relevant literature, Negotiating student numbers and course offerings, Placing more students in honors classes, Significant disconnect-lack of Admin understanding, Support for all-Black male literacy class.
Superintendent	Curriculum office having greatest impact, Impact of reading support classes on gap, Meetings and frequent conversations with building admins, More time to meet with principals, Programs alone don't solve problems, Providing more opportunities for students, Purpose and impact of walk throughs, Struggles negotiating changes with building administrators, Student numbers and course offerings, Working to get more students into AP classes.
Data source 2: Observations	Initial codes developed from observation notes
Descriptive notes	Equitable access to resources and education raised in board member questions, DIA referred to analysis of MSTEP data by race but did not report the achievement gap, Positive performance of Black students in one school, Black students' performance compared to that of other Black students statewide

Reflective notes	The district's Black students' performance was compared to that of other districts' Black students but not to that of the district's White students, Racial achievement gap not mentioned, Race not referenced in general board member questions about equity
Data source 3: document review	Initial codes developed from document review
District Improvement Plan (DIP) 2019-2020	Designed to provide schools and districts with a common planning template, addresses student learning and system needs, Mention of equity without explicit reference to race
School Improvement Plan (SIP) 2019-2020	Planning tool designed to address student achievement and system needs, address the school improvement planning requirements of Public Act 25, Specific goals/strategies/activities do not explicitly address the academic achievement gap between Black and white students
Annual Education Report (AER)	District-level educational progress data, Identifies the High School's key initiative to accelerate reading achievement as campus-wide marking-the-text strategies, No reference made to achievement gap between Black and white students.
Overview of African American Male Reading Support Course	Explicit course objective of identifying students in the achievement gap and increasing their reading comprehension, Empower student learning through student-centered activities and lessons, Focus on texts and lessons to increase student self-esteem
Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Data Talks Analysis Worksheet	Outline for how teachers should engage in PLC data talk/analysis when looking at student work, Outline does not identify the achievement gap between Black and white students, Outline does not specifically direct teachers to analyze/discuss racial achievement gap

The second step of data analysis involved axial coding, as recommended by Ravitch and Carl (2016). Axial coding involved grouping related initial codes into larger categories. In NVivo, child nodes with related content were grouped under one parent node, which represented an axial code. The parent nodes were labeled descriptively. The goal of axial coding was to condense the substantial number of initial codes into a smaller number of categories that provided preliminary insights into the answers to the research questions. Table 4 (pp. 72-74) indicates the grouping of initial codes into axial codes as gathered by the three sources of data.

Table 4

Data Analysis Axial Codes

Data source 1: Interview participants	Axial code	Initial codes contained in axial code
Assistant principal	Effective academic supports but students have unmet, basic needs	Ability to provide support classes, District admins supportive but have different focus, Need for more social and emotional resources for students, Discussions in meetings, Grant funding for math enrichment classes.
	Identifying needs and solutions	Advocating for culturally relevant literature, Reading support classes, Support for teacher PD, Role of District Admins to ask what's needed and provide resources
Director of instruction and assessment	Effective in comprehensive coordination and oversight of systemic solutions	Challenges in working on behalf of schools, Purpose of PLCs, Wearing a lot of hats, Ideal MTSS programming, Charlotte Danielson evaluation tool, More kids identified for services than district able to serve, Negotiating technology rollout with iPads, Administrative meetings and walk throughs, Assuring DIP is in alignment with the SIP, Impacts of systems thinking, Making unpopular decisions, Multi-day training on collaborative teams for PLC system.
	Gaining buy-in and then delegating	Additional supports for reading, Grant funding for math enrichment classes, Restorative practices.
	Top-down development of processes	Creating building level teams for MTSS, MTSS committee meetings.
Director of special education	Effective in negotiating needs and constraints across multiple organizational levels	Dissent over specific protocol-model, So far so good on drop in room, Evidence of effective interventions, Issues with formulas handed down by State Department, Student need for role models, Lack of receptivity by principals, Hiring as practice with the greatest effect on gap,
	Identifying needs and providing solutions	District training for CPI, Fostering relationship-based discipline, Collaborative teaching and drop-in rooms, Administrative meetings for MTSS,
	Meeting staff-reported needs	Collaborating with counsellors, Developing online data repository, Goals of MTSS, Setting up transition plans-services, Observing-providing resources.
Principal	Advocating for student needs	Determination to have AP-honors English classes, Discussing data and college test prep, Negotiating student numbers and course offerings.

Superintendent	Unmet teacher needs contribute to attrition	District admins supportive but have different focus, Negotiating culturally relevant literature, Support for all-Black male literacy class, Ideal for superintendent to have office in each school-greater involvement, Discussions in meetings, Significant disconnect-lack of Admin understanding, Impact of Character Education Program, Placing more students in honors classes.
	Assigning accountability for implementation to building staff	Meetings and frequent conversations with building admins, Programs alone don't solve problems, Student numbers and course offerings.
	Staff can limit implementation effectiveness	Curriculum office having greatest impact, Impact of reading support classes on gap, More time to meet with principals, Providing more opportunities for students, Purpose and impact of walk throughs, Struggles negotiating changes with building administrators.
	Top-down program modification	Working to get more students into AP classes
Data source 2: Observations	Axial code	Initial codes contained in axial code
Descriptive notes	References to equity as a goal omit explicit mention of race	Equitable access to resources and education raised in board member questions, DIA referred to analysis of MSTEP data by race but did not report the achievement gap, Positive performance of Black students in one school, Black students' performance compared to that of other Black students statewide
Reflective notes	No reference to the racial achievement gap	The district's Black students' performance was compared to that of other districts' Black students but not to that of the district's White students, Racial achievement gap not mentioned, Race not referenced in general board member questions about equity
Data source 3: document review	Axial code	Initial codes contained in axial code
District Improvement Plan (DIP) 2019-2020	DIP does not reference racial achievement gap	Mention of equity without explicit reference to race
	Top-down tool development	Designed to provide schools and districts with a common planning template, addresses student learning and system needs

School Improvement Plan (SIP) 2019-2020	SIP does not reference racial achievement gap	Planning tool designed to address student achievement and system needs, address the school improvement planning requirements of Public Act 25, Specific goals/strategies/activities do not explicitly address the academic achievement gap between Black and white students
Annual Education Report (AER)	AER does not reference racial achievement gap	District-level educational progress data, Identifies the High School's key initiative to accelerate reading achievement as campus-wide marking-the-text strategies, No reference made to achievement gap between Black and white students.
Overview of African American Male Reading Support Course	Evidence-based strategies for remediating achievement gap are listed as course goals	Explicit course objective of identifying students in the achievement gap and increasing their reading comprehension, Empower student learning through student-centered activities and lessons, Focus on texts and lessons to increase student self-esteem
Professional Learning Communities (PLC) Data Talks Analysis Worksheet	Teachers do not receive guidance for discussing racial achievement gap	Outline for how teachers should engage in PLC data talk/analysis when looking at student work, Outline does not identify the achievement gap between Black and white students, Outline does not specifically direct teachers to analyze/discuss racial achievement gap

The research practitioner formulated analytic themes by interpreting the themes that emerged from the open coding and axial coding processes. Analytic themes emerged through an iterative process of examining and analyzing the initial and axial codes, grouping related axial codes together, and identifying the major findings the categories of data indicated. Between-methods triangulation was conducted during this stage by comparing axial codes across data sources to identify commonalities and inconsistencies. The themes that emerged from triangulation of the three data sources were named to clarify the significance in answering the research questions. On the following page, Table 5 indicates the grouping of axial codes into analytic themes.

Table 5

Data Analysis Analytic Themes

Analytic theme	Axial codes grouped into analytic theme (source participant in parentheses)
Theme 1: Top-down development of tools	Top-down development of processes (Director of Instruction), Identifying needs and providing solutions (Director of SPED), Top-down program modification (Superintendent), Top-down tool development, Teachers do not receive guidance for discussing racial achievement gap (document review), References to equity as a goal omit explicit mention of race (observations)
Theme 2: Joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility	Gaining buy-in and then delegating (Director of Instruction), Meeting staff-reported needs (Director of SPED), Assigning accountability for implementation to building staff (Superintendent), SIP does not reference racial achievement gap, Teachers do not receive guidance for discussing racial achievement gap (document review),
Theme 3: Asking about needs and facilitating solutions	Identifying needs and solutions (AP), Advocating for student needs (Principal), Evidence-based strategies for remediating achievement gap are listed as course goals (document review), References to equity as a goal omit explicit mention of race (observations)
Theme 4: Central office leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions	Effective in comprehensive coordination and oversight of systemic solutions (Director of Instruction), Effective in negotiating needs and constraints across multiple organizational levels (Director of SPED), Staff can limit implementation effectiveness (Superintendent), DIP does not reference racial achievement gap, SIP does not reference racial achievement gap, AER does not reference racial achievement gap, Teachers do not receive guidance for discussing racial achievement gap (document review), References to equity as a goal omit explicit mention of race (observations)
Theme 5: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports	Effective academic supports but students have unmet, basic needs (Assistant Principal), Unmet teacher needs contribute to attrition (Principal), DIP does not reference racial achievement gap, SIP does not reference racial achievement gap, AER does not reference racial achievement gap, Teachers do not receive guidance for discussing racial achievement gap (document review), No reference to the racial achievement gap (observations)

Appendix G provides a detailed codebook that reports the initial codes and the axial codes. The themes were identified that emerged from the grouping of the axial codes.

Frequency counts are indicated for codes in Appendix G.

Results

This presentation of the results of the data analysis has been organized by research question. Results were presented by emergent themes within the discussion of each related

research question. The themes represented the major findings in the study and indicated the answers to the research questions. Evidence from the data in the form of direct quotations has been provided to support all themes.

Research Question 1. Research Question 1 was the following: How do central office leaders (COLs), namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment (DIA) and a director of special education (SPED) identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students? Two themes emerged during data analysis to answer this research question.

Theme 1: Top-down development of tools. COLs described the leadership practices they provided to the high school in terms of developing tools, methods, and programs that were then passed down to school-level administrators and teachers for implementation. After the tool was developed for use at the school and classroom levels, COLs provided leadership by training school-level administrators to implement the tool correctly. During implementation of the tool, COLs provided leadership through monitoring to ensure the accountability of school administrators and staff.

The COLs explained that the disproportionate assignment of Black students to special education services was identified as a contributing factor to the achievement gap. In describing the development and implementation of a process for ensuring differentiated instruction for students at risk of a special education classification, the DIA first explained his design of the process, the related and supporting materials, and the dissemination of the process structure within the school district:

The idea is that we have to treat kids and their needs individually. So if we are going to do that, then we have to have a process for how that happens. I made a flow chart of how kids would flow through this process, what the expectations were for each person in the process, made all the requisite forms, and we put them all on an internal website that only we have access to internally. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

The DIA further reported that he had assisted in overseeing the process of acclimatizing school-based staff to the new process. When he was highly confident staff could and would implement the process without reverting to more familiar but ineffective processes, he entrusted implementation and monitoring to the school's process oversight team:

I first started the process, and then we went through a year of kind of getting people used to what the process was and getting them not to try to circumvent it by doing things that they were used to doing in the past. So we kind of went through that, and now most people are using the process, especially at the elementary level. They're using the process very well . . . So we're going to hopefully rely on the building-level teams to meet and then report back to the district-level team of how many kids are in the process and what is their status. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

The DIA viewed his leadership practices in terms of his development and delegation of a process and its subsequent monitoring. The participation of school-based staff was limited in his descriptions to learning new processes, implementing them without reverting to outmoded methods, and monitoring and reporting outcomes. This finding was confirmed in the DIA's report to the school board during its November meeting. He indicated that involvement of school-based staff was a separate phase of the initiative that started after the process was finalized at the district-level: "We do have a committee that has been meeting, a district-wide multi-teaching support committee, and we are actually now starting to form building-level committees" (DIA, Researcher observation notes, November 2019, School Board meeting).

Another condition in the district of study that COLs described as contributing to the achievement gap between Black and White students was the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced placement (AP) classes. Increasing the representation of Black students in AP classes to a fair level was an important goal to which the superintendent perceived some

teachers as resistant. The superintendent described his leadership practices in relation to achieving this goal as top-down and prescriptive, including dismissal of teacher feedback that was not aligned with the goal of increasing educational equity:

The AP classes, we've had numerous conversations over the years, over and over again. AP classes can't be all our White kids. AP classes need to represent all the kids in the school. You have to do a better job of getting more kids into the AP classes. Quit telling me that they can't do it . . . Staff were the biggest [obstacle]. They wanted to teach their AP class and they wanted to have 15 kids in there and they wanted the best kids. You should have a variety of students, and if the student wants to take an AP class, they should be able to take the AP class. (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

The SPED also described leadership in terms of developing or relaying processes to address school- and classroom-level problems. Staff and student safety and wellbeing were also raised as concerns when the SPED began her employment with the district. Additionally, inequitable disciplinary practices contributed to the achievement gap through disproportionate disciplining of Black students. The SPED found that staff were inadequately trained in evidence-based classroom-management and disciplinary practices that were effective with special education students. Therefore, she mandated the needed training. The SPED reported of the disciplinary problems that existed when she began her employment with the district:

What I've got . . . is a whole lot of aberrant behaviors, off the wall behaviors, running out of school, biting, kicking, screaming, yelling, that are pretty disruptive to everybody and everything. So we had to quiet that down for a while at every school. (SPED, December 5, 2019)

The SPED first attempted to resolve the district-wide disciplinary issue by mandating use of evidence-based practices, such as crisis prevention, but staff reported an inability to comply because they lacked training. Although the SPED expressed skepticism of this claim, she ensured that all staff received the necessary training and certification:

There was a whole lot of, “I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.” Well, you're supposed to know what to do. You have a background in EI [Early Intervention], how can you not know anything? But that's an easy thing for everybody to say. So I started saying, “Okay, then we're going to make sure you know what to do.” Everybody is CPI [Crisis Prevention Institute] trained now. Everybody, the whole district. (SPED, December 5, 2019)

COLs identified their leadership practices as adapting, prescribing, and initiating solutions to problems that contributed to the achievement gap. COLs also agreed that their leadership practices involved delegating responsibility for effective implementation and monitoring of processes primarily or solely to school-based administrators and staff. This division of responsibility is further explored in relation to Theme 2.

Triangulation of data from the document review corroborated participants' descriptions of tool development in the district as top-down. District and School Improvement Plans provided specific evidence. The goals and strategies of the district and the high school were detailed and prescribed. However, as observation notes and the review of documents indicated, goals and strategies for promoting equity were articulated and published without any explicit reference to the racial achievement gap. The observed discussion of the academic achievement of the district's Black students at the school board meeting was notable in this regard. The DIA presented data about Black students' achievement to the school board by comparing it to data about the achievement of Black students in other school districts in the state. This basis for comparison allowed the DIA to report that the district's Black students were achieving at a level above the state average for Black students. The DIA provided no summary of the racial achievement gap within the district. The board members did not request that information. Triangulation of district documents and observation notes confirmed that tool-development was top-down in the district. Most goals and strategies were not explicitly targeted toward remediation of the racial achievement gap.

Theme 2: Joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility. COLs

identified their leadership practices when they collaborated with school administrators and staff as involving a process of “selling” (gaining staff and administrator buy-in) already-developed solutions. The purpose of gaining buy-in was to increase the efficiency of process and program implementation. COLs also indicated that, when school staff encountered obstacles to implementation, school administrators proposed and “sold” solutions to COLs for the purpose of obtaining necessary approvals or funds.

The DIA reported that COLs perceived math and reading interventions as necessary to remediate the achievement gap. He described the problem and solution as top-down:

[COLs] were looking at our data really, really closely, and we were noting that as kids spent more time in our system, the outcomes for their academics were getting worse . . . And so, we decided that we needed some additional supports, specifically at the secondary level in reading, to help students . . . So, specifically, we broke that data down . . . and we decided to change our reading curriculum, practically K-12. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

However, the DIA reported that leadership should gain the buy-in of school-based personnel. The DIA attempted to impose restorative practices at the high-school level without first identifying and gaining the buy-in of “key people in the building that had some sway over the majority of the staff” (DIA, November 15, 2019). This attempt generated significant pushback from teachers. The DIA learned from this experience. He had more success in implementing restorative practices at the middle school level after working to gain the needed buy-in:

I brought in like six middle school teachers and the principal, and I provided them with two days of training in what restorative practices were. And then I said, "Okay, this could be part of our plan, but you guys have to be on board and you guys have to sell this to the rest of your colleagues." And they agreed to do that. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

COLs’ leadership practices of gaining buy-in from school staff for already-developed solutions facilitated the additional leadership practice of dividing, rather than sharing,

responsibility for the solutions. Specifically, responsibility for process and program implementation and outcomes was assigned to school administrators and staff, and responsibility for program and process design remained with COLs. The DIA reported that when it was expedient to do so, this division of responsibility could serve school administrators as a means of deflecting pushback from parents and students:

I think that the leadership part from central office was almost taking the potential heat for a student losing an elective . . . we basically said, "Well, then you [school-based staff] tell them [students and parents] that we [COLs] said that that's the way it is. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

The superintendent identified that he felt it was useful to the building leadership for COLs to take the blame for programming decisions that impacted the high school. COLs taking on sole responsibility allowed building leaders to maintain their relationships with staff members:

A lot of times [COLs will] make ourselves the bad guys so that [school staff] don't. I've always had that philosophy, "Hey, you know what? You work with those people, you're with them every day. If you have to blame somebody, I don't want you to blame me all the time for everything, but in this situation, if you have to blame somebody, go ahead, blame me." (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

However, the assignment of responsibility for implementation and outcomes to school-based personnel imposed a significant level of accountability. The superintendent reported that part of school administrators' responsibilities for implementation and outcomes was to identify solutions to any obstacles encountered during implementation:

[I'm] having more frequent conversations [with school administrators]. [I ask,] "What are you working on? How can I support you?" Touching base with people more frequently, and it gets hard to do, even in a small district . . . Just trying to meet with people more frequently, have more conversations with people, face to face conversations with people, trying to support their needs. (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

The superintendent reported that school administrators' responsibilities for identifying solutions consisted of selling or promoting the solutions to him:

[I ask,] “Why do you need it? Why do you want it? All right. I'll see if I can make it happen,” trying to support what they think that they need in their buildings as well. But obviously, okay, what is it? Is there data? What can you tell me that shows that this is the best thing and the best way for us to use our resources? (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

Notable in this description was the omission of any mention of independent observation of needs or verification of solution viability on the superintendent's part. The superintendent also discussed school administrators' and staff's responsibility for student learning outcomes:

When you can go back and say, okay, [COLs] provided this support, we provided this, we provided that. Okay, so why aren't the results getting better? What's left to look at? . . . It comes down to the people that are actually in the classroom with the kids. For the most part, we have great teachers, but we're just no different than anywhere else. There are some staff that we should probably try to replace, but that's not the easiest thing to do. (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

The SPED also relied on school-based counselors to identify obstacles to process implementation and the means of overcoming those obstacles. However, some identified solutions were not within the capabilities of COLs. When a problem affecting a student's academic achievement could not be solved feasibly through the joint efforts of COLs and school counselors, the SPED reflected that some situations could not be adequately addressed by district and school supports:

Sometimes [counselors] lean on me and I feel bad, because they'll say, "This kid needs this, this kid needs that. Can you make it happen?" Sometimes I can make it happen and sometimes I can't make it happen for them. They're hard stories. I mean, some of these kids are home [and absent from school] because their mother's at work, they're taking care of siblings, they're not showing up, or they've had a rough run of something. (SPED, December 5, 2019)

Triangulation of data from observation notes and the document review added an important qualification to the findings from the interviews in relation to this theme. Goals and strategies were developed at the district-level and promulgated in a top-down fashion, as discussed in relation to Theme 1. Interview data associated with the presented theme indicated

that gaining the cooperation of school-based employees to promote district-mandated goals and strategies involved assigning the responsibility for the accomplishment of certain goals to school-based personnel.

The omission of any mention of racial equity as a goal from four of the five documents reviewed and from the discussion at the observed school board meeting suggested that responsibility for addressing the achievement gap was not being sold or assigned to school-based personnel. The awareness of the racial achievement gap was not facilitated or encouraged. Although COLs expressed their awareness of the racial achievement gap during their interviews, they did not convey this awareness to school-based personnel. In the data sources used for triangulation, the racial achievement gap was not communicated during the observed board meeting. Therefore, it appeared that the responsibility for remediating the achievement gap was never assigned to any district employee who was in frequent contact with students. The only exception occurred in the instance of the African American Male Reading Support Course.

Research Question 2. Research Question 2 was the following: How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices? One theme emerged during data analysis to answer this research question.

Theme 3: Asking about needs and facilitating solutions. The principal and assistant principal described COLs' leadership practices as consisting of two components, which involved soliciting reports of needs from school administrators and facilitating the solutions school administrators had identified. However, there were apparent differences between school administrators' and COLs' definitions of COLs' leadership practices.

For example, a contradiction emerged in relation to the expansion of reading and math supports. As discussed in relation to Theme 2, the DIA described COLs as identifying the need for additional math and reading supports and then developing and prescribing solutions in a top-down fashion. Conversely, the assistant principal said of the same math and reading supports, “We were able to get central office on board” (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019). This statement implied that the problem and solution were identified at the school level. The COLs’ roles were limited to granting school administrators permission and funding to proceed.

As with this example of reading and math supports, other apparent divergences between COLs’ and school administrators’ descriptions of COLs’ leadership practices were related to which office took the initiative to originate solutions, with school administrators and COLs both claiming this function. These divergences were reconciled through a closer examination of the language used in describing how solutions were implemented. For example, the assistant principal reported school administrators’ identification of a need for professional development for teachers and their presentation of this need to COLs. The assistant principal stated of COLs’ reliance on her reporting of needs, “I’ve never been questioned on any of my evaluations when I’m looking at teachers or giving critiques to teachers” (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019). As discussed in relation to Themes 1 and 2, COLs reported that they relied on school administrators to report conditions that COLs did not independently observe.

The assistant principal expressed her confidence that COLs would facilitate professional development for teachers. She asserted, “They [the COLs] will make it work” (November 10, 2019). She indicated that she did not know or feel a need to know how COLs facilitated the implementation of the identified solution. Statements of this kind reconcile apparent divergences between COLs’ and school administrators’ responses by showing that school administrators

determined *what* needed to be done to address a problem (e.g. professional development for teachers, additional instruction for students). COLs then determined *how* it should be done (e.g., by designing, adapting, or accessing specific processes or programs, and by finding the necessary funding).

This reconciliation of COLs' and school administrators' perspectives was supported by overt points of agreement between the two groups' responses. Both groups agreed that COLs solicited input from school administrators about obstacles to the achievement of district-level goals. Additionally, both groups agreed that school administrators were at least partly responsible for identifying solutions and selling them to COLs, who would facilitate the solutions' implementation. The assistant principal described COLs' supplementary role in the identification of specific means of implementing broadly outlined solutions:

I think it's important [for COLs] to do a little bit of digging and research into patterns and helping us interpret data because I don't know how to. And I don't want to say like, "It's not my job," [but] it's not my skillset. When it comes to data, I can look at this and I can understand it, but I do feel like, that's part of their role. I think that their role is to ask what we need, help us understand what we need and then provide those resources. Whether it's new books, professional development, better technology. All of those things that are important to do, but I don't have the Rolodex of those things. I don't have the connections to those things or really time in the day to be running a building and then going around and finding that stuff too. (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019)

Notable in the assistant principal's response was the characterization of COLs' leadership practices as involving both "ask[ing] what we need . . . and then provid[ing] those resources," and "help[ing] us understand what we need" (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019).

The principal provided an example of cooperative leadership practices. He described how a disagreement between his school's needs and district-level budgetary constraints was resolved. The situation arose in relation to the concern (discussed in relation to Theme 1) about the underrepresentation of Black students in advanced placement (AP) classes. The principal was leader of a majority Black school, where underrepresentation of Black students in AP

classes resulted in such low enrollment that paying an instructor to teach them was difficult to justify from a budgetary standpoint. One possible solution was to eliminate AP classes. However, the principal believed this act would be harmful to students who transitioned to attending college because standard English classes would not adequately prepare them for college-level work. The principal described depriving students of advanced instruction as setting them up to fail in college.

The principal worked with COLs to develop a solution and satisfy budgetary requirements while ensuring students received adequate college preparation. Advanced Placement classes were renamed as honors classes. This was done to circumvent some students' and their parents' aversion to the more challenging work associated with AP classes. The size of those classes was expanded to equal that of the standard classes being offered. The principal described this solution as necessary for educational equity. He set forth, "Equity in the schedule. I mean that's really the only way you can ensure that equity is happening in the school" (Principal, November 13, 2019).

Expanding the AP classes' enrollment created a need for more teachers qualified to teach those classes. The principal sought the assistance of COLs in facilitating the needed professional development:

I said [to COLs,] I need [two specific, named teachers], I need them to be sent for training for 11th grade AP Language, and [COLs are] going to [facilitate] that. So that's one way, they're going to send [the named teachers], they're going to pay the money and have [the named teachers] go to AP Language. (Principal, November 13, 2019)

In the process of reaching these compromises, the principal worked creatively with COLs to identify the needs for AP course offerings for which funding could be justified. Furthermore, the principal addressed solutions for expanding the classes so enrollment would support the budget and of renaming the classes to circumvent any student or parent aversion. These

solutions created the need for additional qualified teachers. The principal worked with COLs to determine optimal staffing for the classes and to facilitate the teachers' qualifications.

As with previous themes, triangulation of data from observations and documents resulted in an important qualification of the finding that the COLs were effective in asking about needs and facilitating solutions. Observation and document data evidenced an omission of any discussion of the racial achievement gap from the district's public and internal communications. The racial achievement gap was not mentioned in observations within four out of five district documents. The observation notes suggested that discussion of the racial achievement gap was avoided actively. For example, the DIA compared the district's Black students' achievement to that of Black students in other districts instead of raising the issue of racial equity within the district. However, the Overview of African American Male Reading Support Course document indicated that evidence-based, targeted remediation could be implemented at the school level with the explicit goal of remediating the racial achievement gap. Triangulating this finding with findings from observations, other documents, and interviews suggested that efforts to remediate the achievement gap in the district have been compartmentalized clearly. The goal of addressing and minimizing the racial achievement gap was not expressed as a district or school level objective. It was articulated as the primary goal of one class, which was developed and implemented according to school-based employees' reports of the need for it.

Research Question 3. Research Question 3 was the following: How do central office leaders (COLs), namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment (DIA), and a director of special education (SPED) identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White

students within a suburban high school? One theme emerged during data analysis to answer this question.

Theme 4: Central office leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions. COLs described their leadership practices as effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions to narrow the achievement gap. The effectiveness of COLs' facilitation of systemic solutions was evidenced in one-on-one interviews and in reports given during a school board meeting. Researcher observation notes indicated the following report during the November 2019 school board meeting:

The DIA highlighted that the scores demonstrate that the efforts that are expended in the classrooms are paying off with improved student achievement, and are therefore, "effective and helping kids learn." School Board members asked questions about student improvement at different elementary schools. To a question about whether all students are receiving equitable education, the DIA answered that all students receive the same resources and access to the same curriculum. (Researcher Observation Notes, November 20, 2019)

However, the research practitioner observation notes indicated that the racial achievement gap and any initiatives to remediate it were not discussed during the school board meeting:

There was no identification of and discussion around the racial achievement gap between Black and White students at the high school . . . The DIA did not discuss initiatives for improvement for the high school, specifically for the racial achievement gap. (Researcher Observation Notes, November 20, 2019)

In interview responses, the DIA expressed the perception that COLs' leadership was needed to supplement school administrators' focused perspective on a single school:

High school principals in general, I'm stereotyping a little bit here, but they are generally focused on day to day operations of the school and what happens when two boys get into a fight or what happened, so they are kind of overwhelmed with operational concerns. Getting them to pay attention and be engaged with academic concerns, it can be more difficult--the fact that [a principal's] school is now 65% African American and they are achieving far below the expectations of what we would want in general. From [principals'] perspective, we're doing everything that we can possibly do to help these

students on an individual level, and they don't necessarily think of, "Well how can we change things systemically." (DIA, November 15, 2019)

The DIA reported that one of the solutions being implemented in the district to narrow the achievement gap was the use of iPads in classrooms. He indicated that his first step in brokering implementation was to visit schools and work with teachers and administrators to gain buy-in, as discussed in relation to Theme 2. He then oversaw and coordinated alterations to school and district technology infrastructure. This oversight required a comprehensive understanding of the initiative's design, the needs of the district, and the needs of individual schools:

When we knew we were going to [implement iPad use in classrooms], you've got three things that you have to address. You have to address the structural needs of the building and the district. So the first thing that I set off doing is I upgraded our servers. I spent like \$80,000 upgrading our servers, and we used E Rate funds and we replaced the wireless infrastructure in the whole district. So we have an access point in every classroom, so we have the bandwidth and the backbone that will allow you to do a one to one [student to iPad ratio]. Then, we started working on the devices, and we started working on accounts for kids at the same time . . . I want to have a company come in and have our servers connect to our online Office 365 so the kids have one login for everything. (DIA, November 15, 2019)

The superintendent offered a perspective similar to the DIA's in stating that COLs' leadership practices were effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating solutions to narrow the achievement gap. The superintendent referred to the district's reading support classes as a successful initiative that was developed, brokered, and facilitated by COLs. He claimed, "I would say [COLs have] gotten probably our best success out of doing our reading support classes, not just at the high school, but middle school" (Superintendent, November 22, 2019). However, the superintendent noted a significant limitation in COLs' leadership effectiveness. The COLs needed to rely on school staff to implement solutions. This dependence on staff support made teacher beliefs and attitudes a potential barrier to solution implementation. The superintendent perceived teacher attitudes and beliefs as limiting implementation success at the

district's high school. He reflected, "I would say my perception of the high school is that they don't believe they need to work any harder or do anything more than what they're already doing" (Superintendent, November 22, 2019). The superintendent disagreed with this attributed belief: "I think they've come a long way, but I believe that there's still lots of work to do" (Superintendent, November 22, 2019). When the research practitioner asked whether his leadership practices were or could be effective in altering teacher attitudes, the superintendent stated the following:

I have very little [influence on teachers' attitudes and beliefs], because I don't work with those people every day. I don't have the relationship with those people that the building administration would have. The building administration has a much better opportunity or chance of changing those beliefs than I would. (Superintendent, November 22, 2019)

The SPED described the reasoning process behind the development of a solution to narrow the achievement gap by providing struggling students with needed supports. She identified two standard solutions to the problem of some students' struggling in an inclusion setting. She reflected that expelling or suspending students for disciplinary infractions was highly undesirable. The hiring of collaborative teachers to provide additional support was not feasible. Regarding the undesirability of expelling or suspending students who had recurring disciplinary issues in an inclusion setting, the SPED stated the following:

Throwing a kid out of school helps nothing, and most of these kids go home and languish because they don't know what to do with themselves, or they're sitting in front of a video screen, not learning very much, or not using any time productively. (SPED, December 5, 2019)

In connection with the unfeasibility of providing additional teaching support, the SPED stated, "If we had more bodies, we could put more collaborative teachers in. But the district is in a financial situation where it can't hire extra bodies" (SPED, December 5, 2019). The SPED stated that teachers needed support in the form of training and professional development to meet all students' needs. She added that the students themselves also needed significant support to

succeed. Therefore, the SPED recommended the solution of hiring a psychologist on a full-time basis to support students who have emotional disorders that interfere with learning:

I think [Black students] need more appropriate role models around them. We have a chance right now, we have somebody that is African American that's interested in becoming a psychologist here. And we would like to support him for that. I think that would be wonderful for the kids [in the high school]. It would be somebody that they can talk to, who has more commonality with them than I would. And I think that's a big deal for some people to feel comfortable, especially to be able to say some of the stuff that's hard to say. (SPED, December 5, 2019)

The SPED agreed with the superintendent in stating that COLs' leadership effectiveness was limited to the design, brokering, and facilitation of solutions and that implementation depended on school staff. She indicated that COLs could exert influence on staff attitudes mainly through selective hiring practices. She claimed, "The highest quality employee I can get in there for those kids, the more dedicated employee, the one that wants to stay after or [who] cares that that kid can't write" (SPED, December 5, 2019).

Triangulation of observation and interview data indicated the importance of articulating remediation of the racial achievement gap as a district-level goal. The perception expressed in interviews that COLs were effective in creating systemic solutions suggested that it was suitable for addressing the systemic problem of the racial achievement gap. The confinement of explicit references to the achievement gap to an overview of one class at one high school was evidence that the racial achievement gap is not being openly addressed at the systemic level. Instead, COLs have appeared to explicitly address the systemic problem of the racial achievement gap in an uncharacteristically piecemeal fashion, through one class in one school.

Research Question 4. Research Question 4 was the following: How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students? One theme emerged during data analysis to answer this research question.

Theme 5: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic

supports. School administrators stated that COLs were effective in facilitating academic supports. For example, the assistant principal agreed with the superintendent's characterization of reading support classes as effective in addressing the achievement gap. As another example of agreement, the principal believed the DIA's initiative to provide an iPad for every student would facilitate the inclusion of culturally relevant literature in the English curriculum. The assistant principal and principal agreed that when a solution was likely to have a direct effect on the test scores used to measure the achievement gap, COLs' leadership practices were almost ideal in that they provided necessary supports while allowing significant autonomy to school staff. Academic needs were effectively identified and discussed at curriculum meetings that involved COLs and school administrators:

We have curriculum meetings once a month, because that's when we're looking at test scores for our building, and we'll work with the middle school principal at the same time. So it's middle school and school admin and then the curriculum director. Sometimes the superintendent will sit in on those meetings, too. So those are a little bit I think more centered on addressing that achievement gap, on looking at what resources we need, and is more informational, I guess, so that we're all on the same page. (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019)

The assistant principal and principal both stated, however, that factors likely to exert a significant but indirect influence on students' test scores were often neglected by COLs. The assistant principal stated that students' academic success depended on meeting more basic needs:

We're trying to meet the most basic needs of these kids--eating, feeling safe, having a place to live after school--and while they're in school meeting those needs too. And then we can address the academics . . . The academic support [from COLs] is great and appreciated and is needed. But I think it's [students'] social and emotional support that we just don't have enough of. (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019)

The assistant principal described the current social and emotional supports for students and indicated they were not enough:

We have two counselors and one social worker, and I know our counselor to student ratio is lower compared to other schools, but the needs of our kids are also much, much greater. We need more of those [supports], because once we can get social emotional support, kids are feeling good about themselves, feeling like they can do it. Then I'm pretty certain scores will increase. (Assistant Principal, November 10, 2019)

Although the assistant principal described students' unmet needs for social and emotional support, the principal stated that teachers had unmet emotional needs for which they did not receive support from COLs. The principal indicated that even a minimal level of acknowledgement and validation from COLs might mean a great deal to teachers:

[Teachers] need to see more support from Central Office. I think teachers need that. Support can look like coming to your classroom every once in a while. Support can be emails [stating,] "Hey, I like what you did here." Support can be just communication, face to face. (Principal, November 13, 2019)

The principal added that teachers who felt unsupported were more likely to leave the district for easier jobs in more affluent schools. The teachers would need validation and encouragement because:

It's harder [to teach in this school]. We have had teachers take pay cuts to go to [more affluent, nearby school districts], pay cuts. Why? You're making a difference over there? You're not making a difference over there. It's easier. Let's be real. It is easier there. You come in front of those students [in an affluent district,] and yes, they're mostly White, and they're going to listen to every word you say. They're not going to question you. They're going to be compliant. (Principal, November 13, 2019)

The principal's and assistant principal's description of the effectiveness of COLs' leadership practices converged on the perception that COLs were not aware of the unmet needs of students and staff that undermined students' academic performance. The principal stated that COLs' leadership would contribute more effectively to narrowing the achievement gap if COLs were "more present in the school. I think they always need more understanding, but again, that comes with being present in the school" (Principal, November 13, 2019). As a potential means of keeping COLs in contact with school conditions, the principal suggested that the central office be relocated to a school site.

Triangulation of observation and document data corroborated the interview findings that COLs were focused exclusively or almost exclusively on providing academic supports. The COLs were not focused on addressing contextual factors on which students' academic success was dependent. An exception to this finding was the African American Male Reading Support Course, which was designed to address contextual influences such as students' self-esteem. The course also integrated a mentoring program that matched the high school students with adult members from the community. The implementation of this course demonstrated its feasibility and raised potentially the question of why its goals and strategies have not been implemented at a systemic level.

Chapter Summary

Two themes emerged during data analysis to answer the first research question. The first theme, top-down development of tools, indicated that COLs described the leadership practices they provided to the high school in terms of developing tools, methods, and programs that were then passed down to school-level administrators and teachers for implementation. After the tool was developed for use at the school and classroom level, COLs provided leadership by training school-level administrators to implement the tool correctly. During the implementation of the tool, COLs provided leadership by ensuring the accountability of school administrators and staff for monitoring and outcomes.

The second theme, joint work to gain buy-in and divide responsibility, indicated that COLs identified their leadership practices when they collaborated with school administrators and staff as involving a process of selling (or gaining staff and administrator buy-in for) already-developed solutions. The purpose of gaining buy-in was to increase the efficiency of process and program implementation. The COLs' leadership practices of gaining buy-in from school staff

for already-developed solutions facilitated the additional leadership practice of dividing, rather than sharing, responsibility for the solutions. Specifically, responsibility for the process and program implementation and outcomes was assigned to school administrators and staff. The responsibility for program and process design remained with COLs.

The theme that emerged to answer the second research question inquired about needs and facilitating solutions. The principal and assistant principal identified COLs' leadership practices as soliciting reports of needs from school administrators and facilitating the solutions.

The third research question was answered by the following theme: Central office leadership practices were effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions. In data associated with this theme, COLs described their leadership practices as effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions to narrow the achievement gap.

Central office leadership was effective primarily in facilitating academic supports was the theme that addressed the fourth research question. In relation to this theme, school administrators stated that COLs were effective in facilitating academic supports. However, COLs often neglected other factors that exerted influence on students' test scores. They both acknowledged that unmet teacher and student needs do not promote optimal student outcomes. Chapter 5 contained the discussion, interpretation, and implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to provide concrete evidence about how central office leadership supports and practices were carried out and what perceived impact those practices and supports had on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. This chapter incorporated a discussion of the findings in this study and the relationships with the previous literature review chapter. This section also encompassed an understanding of the significance of the findings and the implications for district-level educational leadership practices. There was a discussion of the limitations that existed due to the study's various constraints. Lastly, this chapter provided recommendations for future research based on the findings and limitations.

Discussion

A single exploratory case study methodology was implemented to conduct this research study. As discussed in preceding chapters, a one key principle of case study research was using the between-methods triangulation of varied data sources to confirm research findings. Key informant interviews, a direct observation and document reviews were utilized as the sources for data collection and triangulation. Data analysis involved transcribing and coding the data collected. The grouping of the codes facilitated identification of the broader categories of themes for answering the research questions.

The four research questions used to guide this study were the following:

1. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*
2. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?*
3. *How do central office leaders, namely a superintendent, a director of instruction and assessment, and a director of special education identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students within a suburban high school?*
4. *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

Findings in this section have been discussed in terms of the relationship to the conceptual framework in this study which was partly shaped by Honig (2012). Honig argued that the traditional roles of central office leaders (COLs) were not effective in supporting principals in leading school reform efforts. She identified these roles as directing, managing, and monitoring principals from a distance. Through her research, she identified practices and supports associated with effective central office leadership which were comprised of (1) developing and using tools, (2) focusing on joint work, (3) acting as a broker, (4) modeling effective behavior and (5) sustaining social engagement.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Honig (2012) stated that COLs should *develop and utilize tools* by providing a consistent set of protocols and practices through which principals and COLs deepen their engagement in school improvement and reform efforts. *Joint work* consisted of collaborative activities for which COLs and school-based personnel share responsibility. *Acting*

as a broker involved introducing new ideas, programs, and other resources to advance the goals of the school and the school district. *Modeling effective behavior* entailed demonstrating expected behaviors and expressing the anticipation of others to imitate, as opposed to presenting expectations only through verbal directions. *Sustaining social engagement* encompassed the idea of increasing collective knowledge and improving practice through ongoing discussions.

Although the themes that emerged from the data in this study did not align exactly with the practices and supports identified by Honig (2012), the themes and their associated data accomplished the study's purpose of identifying specific ways in which COLs were engaging in or not engaging in those practices. The discussion in this section is organized by the research themes were related to Honig's effective COL practices and other relevant literature. Under each research question, themes have been set forth in terms of the research question and the study's purpose. The discussion has continued by considering how the themes were related to Honig's effective COL practice

Research Question 1. Based on an overall pattern and specific examples identified in the data, two themes emerged during data analysis to answer the study's first research question. These themes were (1) top-down development of tools and (2) joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility. These two themes contributed to accomplishing the purpose of the study and spoke to the gap articulated in the literature.

With respects to the first theme, top-down development of tools, the three COLs in this study described their leadership practices and supports for the high school in terms of specific examples. Tool development was described as *top-down* because it occurred at the district level, the highest level in the organization. These tools were then transmitted downward in the organizational hierarchy to the school level.

The director of instruction and assessment (DIA) reported the example of implementing supports for students who were at risk of being assigned to special education. This student classification contributed to the achievement gap through its disproportionate assignment to Black students. The DIA reported that the new process for identifying and providing supplementary supports (including additional reading and math classes) to struggling students was designed by him and a committee consisting primarily of COLs. The fully developed process was then disseminated to school staff through internal channels, such as the district's employee website. The training was provided to staff to ensure they were comfortable with and willing to implement the proposed solutions. School staff did not contribute significantly to the program's design, but they were held responsible for implementing and monitoring it to ensure success. Similarly, the superintendent expressed that he had required the expansion of Advanced Placement (AP) classes in the high school to address the underrepresentation of Black students in the classes. This goal was identified at the district level and implemented notwithstanding protests levied by some teachers.

The director of special education (SPED) reported that when her employment in the district began, she addressed the ongoing problem of disruptive student behavior in inclusion settings by identifying effective, evidence-based classroom management practices and facilitating training for all teachers. Triangulation of district documents and observation notes confirmed that tool development was top-down and added the qualification that district and school level goals and strategies were not explicitly targeted toward remediation of the racial academic achievement gap.

Data associated with the second theme, joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility, indicated more specifically how COLs worked with school administrators and

staff to facilitate the implementation of COL-designed initiatives for improving students' academic success. COLs reported that they engaged in the process of identifying and developing specific solutions. They gained the buy-in of school-based personnel to facilitate the implementation of those solutions. They led the effort to divide the subsequent responsibilities for the success of those solutions. Specifically, COLs reported that they retained responsibility for the design of solutions. This was established so that school administrators could refer parents' or students' complaints about new requirements to COLs. However, accountability for the implementation and success of the solutions was assigned to school administrators and staff.

Although school-based personnel did not have a voice in the district-level design of solutions, they were required to report any barriers to implementation to COLs so that additional funding or other solutions could be provided to achieve desired outcomes. Triangulation of data from the observation notes and the document review added an important qualification to the findings from the interviews in relation to this theme. Although COLs expressed their awareness of the racial achievement gap during their interviews, the data sources used for triangulation did not reflect that they conveyed this information to school-based personnel or to the board members. It seemed that addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students was not an intentional goal at the district or school level. However, it was observed and recorded that the African-American Male Reading Support Course was, in fact, designed to address the academic needs of Black male students.

Research Question 2. The third theme emerged during data analysis to answer Research Question 2: asking about needs and facilitating solutions. In relation to this theme, the principal and assistant principal described COLs' leadership practices as consisting of soliciting reports of needs from school administrators and facilitating the solutions school administrators had

identified. Although triangulation revealed some divergence between COLs' and school administrators' perceptions, both groups of participants agreed that COLs relied on school administrators to report conditions that COLs did not observe independently. COLs solicited input from school administrators about obstacles to the achievement of district-level goals. School administrators were at least partially responsible for identifying strategies to eliminate or reduce barriers and report them to COLs. It was expected that the COLs would facilitate the solutions for effective implementation.

Triangulation of COLs' and school administrators' responses resulted in the finding that school administrators determined *what* needed to be done to address a problem (e.g., professional development for teachers, additional instruction for students). The COLs then determined *how* it should be done (e.g., by designing, adapting, or accessing specific processes or programs and by finding the necessary funding). Triangulating this finding with data from an observation, other documents and interviews suggested strongly that efforts to remediate the academic racial achievement gap in the district have been compartmentalized. The goal of remediation was not expressed as a district or school level objective. However, it was conveyed as the primary goal of the African-American Male Reading Support Course. This class was developed and implemented according to school-based employees' reports about the need for it.

Theme three, asking about needs and facilitating solutions, contributed further to achieving the study's purpose. Specific examples of COLs' leadership practices were identified through the triangulation of COLs' and building level leaders responses to develop a more robust definition of COLs' leadership practices.

Research Question 3. The fourth theme emerged during data analysis to answer this question: central office leadership practices were effective in developing, brokering, and

facilitating systemic solutions. In data related to this theme, COLs described their leadership practices as effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions to narrow the achievement gap.

COLs also noted a significant limitation to their leadership effectiveness in that hierarchical leadership practices, such as delegating, required COLs to rely on school staff to implement solutions. This dependence on staff support made teacher beliefs and attitudes a potential barrier to solution implementation. COLs believed they exerted little or no influence on staff attitudes and beliefs.

Triangulation of observation and interview data indicated the importance of articulating the remediation of the racial achievement gap as a district-level goal. The confinement of explicit references to the achievement gap to an overview of one class at one high school was evidence that the racial achievement gap was not being openly addressed at the systemic level. The reported efficacy of the COLs in addressing systemic problems through whole-school solutions indicated that district level coordination of efforts to remediate the persistent deeply-rooted problem of the racial achievement gap has the potential to be more effective than current approaches.

Research Question 4. Theme five emerged during data analysis to answer this research question: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports. The assistant principal and principal agreed that COLs' leadership practices were almost ideal when a solution was likely to have a direct effect on the test scores used to measure the racial achievement gap. They reported that COLs provided necessary supports while allowing significant autonomy to school staff.

The assistant principal and principal both stated that COLs neglected factors likely to exert a significant but indirect influence on students' test scores. The assistant principal stated that students' academic success was dependent on meeting more basic needs, such as nutrition and emotional support. She stated firmly that COLs' leadership was ineffective in meeting those needs. The principal added that COLs did not meet teachers' emotional needs for acknowledgment and validation. Acknowledging and addressing teachers' unmet needs were viewed as low-cost means of curtailing staff attrition. The principal emphasized that COLs must be more present in the school to remain aware of the needs of students and teachers.

Triangulation of observation and document data corroborated the interview findings that COLs were highly focused on providing academic supports. This focus was not balanced with properly addressing contextual factors on which students' academic success was dependent. An exception to this finding was the African American Male Reading Support Course. From the document review, this course was designed to address contextual influences such as low self-esteem in adolescent Black males. The implementation and sustained support of this course demonstrated its value. Therefore, it raises the possibility of exploring how this type of course can be modeled and scaled up at a systems level to address purposefully the academic achievement gap between Black and White students.

Interpretations and Implications

From the preceding discussion, a summary of the main findings of the case may be constructed. Table 6 (p. 104) encapsulates the central office leadership practices identified in the case district.

Table 6

Case District Central Office Leadership Practices

Participant group	Central office leadership practices identified in findings
Central office leaders	Theme 1: Top-down development of tools Theme 2: Joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility
Building administration	Theme 3: Asking about needs and facilitating solutions

Table 7 summarizes the perceived effectiveness of COL leadership practices in the case district.

Table 7

Perceived Effectiveness of Central Office Leadership Practices

Participant group	Perceived effectiveness of central office leadership practices
Central office leaders	Theme 4: Central office leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions
Building administration	Theme 5: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports

In relation to Honig's (2012) framework of effective COL practices, COLs in this study identified their practices as focused primarily on developing and brokering tools, including processes and programs, to provide principals with consistent protocols for improving students' academic achievement. Joint work was described by Honig (2012) as assistance relationships that allow COLs and principals to work alongside each other to achieve desired improvements and changes. In this case study, instead of working collaboratively on specific tasks, COLs assumed sole responsibility for developing tools. They then delegated responsibility for effectively using those tools to principals and school staff.

The COLs did not describe their leadership practices as allowing school based personnel a significant voice in tool development. They indicated that principals' and staff objections

were, in some cases, ignored, overruled, or interpreted as indications of being uncooperative. Instead of having a voice in tool development or working collaboratively with COLs on implementation, school-based personnel were described as adopting the passive role of customers to whom COLs sold, or gained buy-ins for already-developed solutions which staff would proceed to use.

Other researchers, in addition to Honig (2012), have noted a need for collaborative leadership shared between COLs and school personnel to improve students' academic achievement and outcomes. In alignment with Honig, Belisle (2004) asserted that collective leadership practices promote transformation and meet the needs of school communities as opposed to hierarchical leadership structures. Simkins (2015) promoted the idea that educational leadership could occur at any level in a school community. The values of cooperation and collaboration were more productive than hierarchical structures of control. Based on the work of Belisle (2004), Honig (2012), and Simkins (2015), leaders of school districts and schools must implement structures, processes, and practices that promote collective responsibility and shared leadership among stakeholders. COLs, in the present study, described their leadership practices as misaligned with a model of collective leadership. Leadership practices were based on a model of top-down tool development and delegation in which principals and school staff serve instrumental roles.

School administrators identified COLs' leadership practices as aligned most closely with Honig's (2012) *tool development* and *brokering* practice categories. However, the division of responsibilities and duties between COLs and school-based personnel was perceived as precluding meaningful joint work or modeling. Rather than collaborating on tasks and sharing responsibility, COLs and school-based personnel performed related but non-overlapping

functions to identify problems and suggest, develop, and facilitate solutions. The absence of collaboration in overlapping functions precluded modeling because COLs who did not engage in any of the functions performed by school-based personnel had no opportunities to model success in those functions.

The triangulation of themes one, two and three in the present study indicated that COLs' leadership practices focused primarily on tool development and brokering. The practices omitted modeling, supporting through truly collaborative joint work, and monitoring through direct engagement with and observation of conditions in the high school. Themes four and five enhanced the research practitioner's insight into how these traditional and hierarchical leadership practices limited the effectiveness of COLs' leadership support of the high school.

As discussed in relation to themes one and two, Belisle (2004), Honig (2012), and Simkins (2015) indicated that leadership might occur at any level in a school district. It is optimal for leadership to focus on and harness the potential for all staff to make meaningful contributions to solution design. This approach is more likely to be effective than hierarchical control. Lack of COLs' consciousness of the limitations related to the effectiveness of their top-down, hands-off delegation of solution implementation was consistent with the findings of these researchers. Theme three confirmed the findings of the aforementioned researchers by indicating that hierarchical central office leadership based on delegation without meaningful joint work or modeling, had only limited effectiveness. The limitations resulted in a failure to involve and engage school-based staff. However, the work of Belisle (2004), Honig (2012), and Simkins (2015) indicated that the limitation of leadership effectiveness reported by COLs in this study could be overcome through shared or collective leadership involving all levels of staff, through the sharing of tasks and responsibility, and through modeling of desired behaviors.

Another significant finding in relation to theme four 4 emerged from observation notes. The racial achievement gap and any initiatives to remediate it were not discussed during the district's November 2019 school board meeting. Although COLs considered themselves effective in developing, brokering and facilitating systemic solutions, the omission of a targeted discussion of the racial academic achievement gap during the school board meeting could prove to be problematic. Welton, Diem, and Holme (2015) studied how suburban school leaders respond and change due to increased levels of minority student enrollment. The study's findings concluded that color-blind (i.e., not seeing race as significant) and color-mute (i.e., not talking about race) approaches are ineffective in ensuring educational equity when student racial demographics shift. Welton et al. (2015) argued that when issues of race and levels of discomfort about race were not explicitly and directly addressed, the result might be to perpetuate or exacerbate existing educational inequities. Therefore, Welton et al. asserted that COLs must lead and support principals in addressing racial inequities. From this assertion, a COL leadership practice that is effective in addressing the racial achievement gap is that of foregrounding and maintaining racial equity as an explicit, district-level priority and focus of educational practice.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), district leaders must remain conscious of the practices and supports that either increase or diminish the work of building principals. Other researchers have found that COLs should play a vital role in overseeing and guiding instruction in the classrooms. Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) concluded that school district leaders must maintain great influence over the type of instructional practices utilized and the level of guidance provided to teachers. COLs must be present in schools to identify all student and staff needs that may contribute to perpetuating the racial achievement gap. A steady

and meaningful presence can assist with developing, brokering, and facilitating solutions with optimal effectiveness on student outcomes. Leaders should work collaboratively to model solution implementations (Honig, 2012) and to ensure a collective leadership structure in which systemic directives that are aligned to classroom and school conditions that influence academic outcomes.

The recommendations for practices that COLs in the case district were advised to implement are derived from the interpretations and implications of the findings in this case study, as well as the relationships between the findings and the previous theoretical and empirical literature. Table 8 summarizes the recommended changes to the present conditions indicated in the study's findings.

Table 8

Comparisons Between the Case Summary and Recommendations for Practice

The current practice described in the findings	Recommended central office leadership practice to replace the current practice
Theme 1: Top-down development of tools	School-based personnel should maintain an active rather than a passive role in tool development. They should have a voice in tool development while working collaboratively with COLs on implementation.
Theme 2: Joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility	Implement structures, processes, and practices that promote collective responsibility and shared leadership.
Theme 3: Asking about needs and facilitating solutions	COLs should lead through modeling, which calls for direct participation in school-level tasks. The monitoring of results should be conducted through direct engagement with and observation of school conditions.
Theme 4: Central office leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions	Harness the potential for all staff to make meaningful contributions to solution design. Foreground and maintain racial equity as an explicit, district-level priority and a focus of educational practice.
Theme 5: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports	COLs should be present in schools to work collaboratively with building leaders and model solutions. Therefore, systemic directives are informed by direct observation of and contact with the classroom and school conditions that influence academic outcomes.

Social Justice Implications. Rising out of the interviews, observation and document reviews, the academic achievement gap between Black and White students in this suburban district constituted the fundamental notion of this matter being a social justice issue. This study exposed social injustices that could potentially rob students of their right to receive consequential educational opportunities to enhance their life chances. This study demonstrated that COLs' lack of meaningful engagement and vigorous investment in the achievement of Black students is at the heart of this injustice.

Based on aforementioned demographic data, Black students are learners in suburban school districts. It is noteworthy that 65% (nearly two-thirds) of the student body was Black in the high school that was the focus of this study. The overwhelming majority of leaders, teachers and staff in the case study school district were White. The findings suggest that there was a deficit in COLs explicitly identifying rigorous goals and strategies that closes the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. As suggested by Welton, Diem, and Holme (2015), as leaders work to transform school communities that have a growing number of minority students, it is imperative to dismantle color-blind and color-mute school reform approaches.

Limitations and Recommendations

Because the research practitioner handled the collection and the analysis of the data, subjectivity and bias were recognized as limitations, potentially weakening the conformability of the findings. A member-checking procedure was used to strengthen the conformability of the findings by asking participants to verify the researcher's preliminary interpretations of the data. In addition, the triangulation of data sources was used to limit the potential influence of the

research practitioner's bias by facilitating the comparison of a variety of perspectives on the case.

The credibility, dependability and confirmability of the findings were limited by the necessity of relying on honest and authentic insights and responses by the participants. The research practitioner assured participants that their identities would remain confidential to enhance credibility by encouraging participant honesty. The research practitioner used member-checking procedures to strengthen trustworthiness by allowing participants to review their responses. In addition, the research practitioner shared interpretations and requested any alterations that would make the findings more accurately representative of their perspectives. The utilization of NVivo 12 data analysis software provided an audit trail tool that allowed for the examination of the data analysis process.

In Chapter One, the research practitioner noted the trustworthiness of the findings might be weakened if the research practitioner could not gain access to any of the planned data sources. This involved interviews with COLs and school administrators, archival data, and researcher observations of COLs and school administrator meetings. The research practitioner's request to review archival documents and to attend and observe private meetings between COLs and school administrators was denied due to reasons of privacy and confidentiality. The research practitioner attended and observed a public-school board meeting in which matters relevant to this study were addressed to compensate for the exclusion of these data sources. The research practitioner also obtained a transcript of the school board meeting to ensure accurate reporting. The transcript and research practitioner observation field notes of this public meeting constituted a third data source to facilitate triangulation with interview data from each of the two groups of participants.

The transferability of findings in this study is potentially limited by the delimitation of the study to one high school in one suburban school district. Detailed descriptions of the data have been provided in the form of extensive direct quotations in the presentation of results to facilitate future researchers' determinations of transferability. Future researchers may use participant's descriptions of conditions in their school district and high school to assess the transferability of the findings to other research contexts.

Lastly, the use of a qualitative methodological approach in this study entailed limitations to the interpretation of the findings. First, the findings in this study were not intended to be generalizable, even though they may or may not be transferable to other populations and samples. Second, the use of a qualitative methodological approach facilitated an open-ended exploration of participants' perceptions, which indicated perceived causal relationships among certain conditions and factors. However, these findings must be interpreted as participants' perceptions of the existence of a causal relationship.

Recommendations for Further Study

Two sets of recommendations for further study are made in this section. The first set is based on the study limitations and is intended to facilitate a more robust confirmation of the findings in this study by overcoming its limitations. The second set is based on the findings and the topics they open for further exploration.

Recommendations based on limitations. A limitation associated with the study design is that reliance on the accuracy and honesty of participants' responses prevented the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of the findings from being established conclusively. This research practitioner recommends a case study be conducted with additional triangulation of

multiple data sources, such as researcher observations and archival data, to verify or qualify participants' interview responses to address this limitation.

A second limitation associated with the study design was that the delimitation to one high school made the results unlikely to be transferable to other research contexts. While the district in this case study provided a meaningful and valuable forum to conduct the study, to enhance and deepen the quality of the research of findings, a multiple case study is suggested. In addition, the research practitioner recommends that the present study be replicated in other research settings to determine the transferability of the findings to address this limitation. Recommended settings for study replication include school districts of different sizes, school districts with different demographic compositions, elementary and middle schools, and schools in different U.S. regions and settings (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban).

A limitation associated with this study's qualitative methodological approach was that the potential for researcher bias to influence the findings prevented conformability from being established. The research practitioner recommends that a quantitative study be conducted using a validated questionnaire instrument and statistical analysis to test the validity and reliability of findings in this study with the assurance of objectivity to address this limitation.

A further methodological limitation was that the qualitative approach prevented the findings from being generalizable. The research practitioner recommends that a quantitative study be conducted using a large sample and a validated questionnaire instrument to facilitate generalization to address this limitation.

Recommendations based on findings. Based on the study's findings that COLs practiced top-down development of tools, the research practitioner recommends that research be conducted to further test Honig's (2012) perspective in the context of COLs' leadership

practices. Simultaneously, research should be conducted in school districts in which tool development is top-down and in school districts where tool development is collaborative across hierarchical levels. The effectiveness, challenges, and benefits of their respective implementation of tools can be compared to provide additional guidance to school reform that is focused on addressing racial academic achievement gaps. Such a study would consist of the development of research-based criteria for consistently categorizing school districts according to their level of collaborative versus top-down tool development.

The second finding concluded that COLs practiced joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility. The recommendation that joint work is truly collaborative raises the question of what specific forms truly collaborative joint work between COLs and school staff might take. The present research practitioner may undertake a multiple-case study of several districts, using maximum variation sampling for selection of cases, and involving researcher observations, interviews, and analysis of archival documents related to tools, their development, and their implementation to develop more specific recommendations for practice regarding how collaborative joint work may be effectively practiced.

The third finding was that COLs practiced asking school administrators about needs and facilitating solutions. As with the previous finding, the implication for practice based on this finding raises the question of what forms COLs' on-ground collaboration with and support of school staff might take in practice. The present research practitioner may undertake additional qualitative case study research in which COLs engaging in modeling, collaboration, and monitoring practices are shadowed for several days to facilitate researcher observations. Researcher observations would then be triangulated with data from interviews with the shadowed COL and some or all the school staff with whom they interact during the observation period.

The fourth finding identified that COLs effectively practiced the development, brokering, and facilitation of systemic solutions. The recommendation that racial equity should be foregrounded as an explicit district goal raises the question of how effective such foregrounding can be in remediating racial achievement gaps. The research practitioner may undertake triangulated mixed-methods research in which district-level goals from a large sample of school districts are analyzed to determine whether and how racial equity is posited as a district goal. Future researchers can conduct a quantitative study to compare racially stratified achievement data from before and after the goal of racial equity was officially stipulated to identify statistical correlations between identification of the goal and severity of racial achievement gaps.

Chapter Summary

Findings summarized in the discussion section of this chapter indicated that COL leadership practices were classified as top-down development of tools, joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility and asking about needs and facilitating solutions. The discussion further indicated that central office leadership practices were effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions, and that central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports.

Five implications for practice were recommended for the consideration of COLs in the case district. The first implication highlighted that school-based personnel should have a present and active role in the development of tools and work collaboratively with COLs to ensure effective implementation. Secondly, the structures, processes, and practices should be implemented to promote joint responsibility and shared leadership among all stakeholders. The third implication called for COLs to lead through modeling, engage in joint work, and monitor school conditions through direct engagement with school leaders and teachers. The fourth

implication asserts that it is essential that racial equity is identified as an explicit district-level priority that is reinforced and supported by effective educational practices. The final implication affirms that COLs should be present in schools to work collaboratively with staff members and to model solution implementation.

The research study's limitations were acknowledged and discussed to provide greater insight into the constraints and restraints of the research study. Strategies were provided to mitigate and address these limitations. The potential for the research practitioner's bias was recognized as a limitation that could impact data collection and analysis processes. The findings of the study depended on the participants' ability and willingness to provide truthful and accurate information and reflections. Another limitation of the study was that the research practitioner was not able to conduct multiple observations due to confidentiality concerns of the participants. Based on the study design, limitations were also comprised of potential partial transferability due to the focus of one school district in this case study. Due to the nature of an exploratory qualitative case study methodological approach, the last implication was the objective identification of casual relationships among certain conditions and factors.

Recommendations for further research were provided based on the study's limitations and findings. To control for research bias, a quantitative research design should be carried out. Future multiple-case studies should be conducted in a variety of school districts so that robust data from several sources can expand and verify the findings of this research study. Based on the findings, additional research projects should be designed to compare the top-down hierarchical structures to collaborative leadership structures. These findings can provide additional guidance to how schools can effectively address the academic achievement gap between Black and White students. Finally, to determine if identifying racial equity as an explicit district level goal has an

impact on addressing the achievement gap between Black and White students, a triangulated mixed-methods research design focused on a large sample size should be conducted.

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APPENDIX A: IRB NOTICE OF DETERMINING UNREGULATED IRB



Flint Institutional Review Board • 4204 William S. White Building, Flint Michigan 48502-1950 • phone (810) 762-3383 • fax (810) 766-6791 • research@umflint.edu

To: Carmen Kennedy

From:

There were no items to display

Cc:

Carmen Kennedy
Tyrone Bynoe

Subject: Notice of Determination of "Not Regulated" Status for [HUM00171471]

SUBMISSION INFORMATION:

Title: AN ANALYSIS OF CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT AND ADDRESS THE LAGGING LEARNING GAP OF MINORITY POPULATED SUBURBAN HIGH SCHOOLS

Full Study Title (if applicable):

Study eResearch ID: [HUM00171471](#)

Date of this Notification from IRB: 10/22/2019

Date of IRB Not Regulated Determination: 10/22/2019

IRB NOT REGULATED STATUS:

Category Outcome Letter Text

**Case
Studies –
Other**

Based on the information provided, the proposed project does not fit the definition of human subjects research requiring IRB approval. For the purpose of human subject protection regulation, the definition of research is as follows: "...a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge." (per 45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 56 and UM policy). To the extent that your proposed case study does not constitute a systematic investigation, and is intended as an interesting example for educational purposes rather than a contribution to generalizable knowledge, IRB review and oversight of the project is not required. To expand your study in the future to include more than one or two cases, contact the IRB to determine if IRB approval prior to initiation of the project is required.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT LETTER AND INFORMATION

37534 St. Martins Street
Livonia, MI 48219

October 15, 2019

Dear Prospective Research Participant:

I am writing to request your consideration to serve as a participant in a research study. The title of this research is *An Analysis of Central Office Leadership Practices that Support and Address the Lagging Learning Gap of Minority Populated Suburban High Schools*. Attached is a two-page document entitled “Research Study Information”. Please read this document thoroughly. Hopefully, it will answer some of the questions that you may have about this study.

Your decision to participate in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without any adverse consequences. If you decide to participate, it is required that you indicate your consent by typing your name and date on the indicated lines on page two of the attached document. Your typed name shall be considered as your electronic signature and indicates your agreement to participate. Save the file and send it to me as an attachment to carmenke@umich.edu

Please be assured that I will utilize ethical research principles throughout the course of this qualitative case study. These principles require that I appropriately seek voluntary participation, obtain an informed consent from each participant, protect anonymity and maintain confidentiality.

Should you have questions or concerns, please contact me at your earliest convenience via phone at 313.505.6732 or via e-mail at carmenke@umich.edu

I look forward to the possibility of working with you. Thank you for your consideration of my request as well as your time and energy!

Sincerely,

Carmen G. Kennedy-Rogers

Carmen G. Kennedy-Rogers
Doctorate Student, Education Department
University of Michigan—Flint

RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION

Nature and Purpose of the Project:

This qualitative case study research allows for the exploration and understanding of complex issues and dynamics that impact and influence the daily practices of high school administrators, central-office leaders and the supports that are in place to address the achievement gap between Black and White students.

Explanation of Procedures:

To carry out this study, key informant interviews, direct observations and document reviews will be utilized.

Potential Benefits:

The results of this study will be shared with all participants in the case study. The results may prove beneficial to suburban schools across the country by providing information on what may be a best or promising practice to help students succeed in order to address effectively the achievement gap between Black and White students.

Potential Risks:

There are no known economic, legal, physical, psychological, or social immediate or long-term risks to participants. Proper confidentiality standards will be maintained to guard the results of individual assessment forms.

Costs:

There are no financial costs to participate in this study. The investment of your time will be needed to complete this study.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not required to participate and declining to participate will not jeopardize your current employment status. You may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation from the study at any time without incurring any consequences.

Confidentiality and Anonymity:

All research materials will be handled, managed and secured carefully by Carmen Kennedy-Rogers, the researcher. Names of the participants will not be disclosed to provide anonymity for all participants. Only the final outcomes of the research study will be shared and communicated with the participants of the case study.

Who to Call if You Have any Questions:

Please direct all questions related to this study to the researcher utilizing the contact information stated previously in this form.

The Purpose and Meaning of Signing this Form:

By signing this consent form, you agree to participate in the research study. You also agree to maintain confidentiality in regards to your participation and the contents of the study for the duration of the study. You acknowledge that the purpose, procedures, potential benefits, risks and costs of your participation have been explained to you above. In addition, you are aware of the how the research ethic principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality and anonymity will be carried out for this research study.

Please save a copy of this consent form for your records.

Typing your name and the date in the provided spaces below is regarded as your electronic signature and therefore your consent to take part in this study.

Participant's Signature (Electronic)

Date

APPENDIX C: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS AND QUESTIONS

PHASE 1: Opening statement to participants

Hi _____, (name of person) .

Thank you for agreeing to spend time with me to assist with this research study. I recognize and appreciate your demanding and full schedule.

As shared with you in the consent form, the goal of this qualitative case study is to explore and understand the complex issues and dynamics that influence the daily practices of high school building administrators, central-office leaders and the practices that are in place to address the achievement gap between Black and White students.

Today, I hope to learn about your influence as the _____ (position). Any information you share with me will not be attributed to you or utilized to identify you or any participant in this study.

I will pose a series of questions to you. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are not required to participate; declining to participate will not jeopardize your current employment status. At any time during this interview, you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation from the interview and/or the study at any time without incurring any consequences. You may also decline to answer any question during this interview.

I would like to receive your permission to record this interview. This will assist in note taking, ensuring I hear and understand your statements and to ensure timely completion of our interview session. The recording will be kept confidential and held in a secure manner. This audio recording will only be heard and reviewed by me. If at any time you would prefer that I turn off the recorder, please let me know. I will comply with your request immediately.

Do I have your permission to begin recording our discussions?

PHASE 2: Conduct Interview utilizing the semi-structured questions.

QUESTIONS FOR CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERS

Research Question #1: *How do central office leaders, namely a Superintendent, a Director of Instruction and Assessment, and a Director of Special Education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

Semi-Structured Questions:

1. How would you describe your role as a central office leader?
2. What do you see as the central office leaderships' role in addressing the academic achievement gap in the high school?
3. What are your specific goals in regards to addressing the academic achievement gap?
4. What are specific central office leadership practices implemented in regards to addressing the academic achievement gap?

Research Questions #3: *How do central office leaders, namely a Superintendent, a Director of Instruction and Assessment, and a Director of Special Education identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students within a suburban high school?*

Semi-Structured Questions:

1. In your role, how do you feel you have addressed the achievement gap?
2. How have central office leadership and practices effect the achievement gap?
3. What central office leadership practices have had the greatest effect on addressing the academic achievement gap?
4. What additional practices are needed from central office leadership to assist in addressing the academic achievement gap?

QUESTIONS FOR PRINCIPAL AND ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

Research Question #2: *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?*

Semi-Structured Questions:

1. How would you describe your role as the principal/assistant principal in the school?
2. What do you see as the central office leaders' role in addressing the academic achievement gap in the high school?
3. What are your specific goals in regards to addressing the academic achievement gap?
4. What specific action steps you have taken to address the achievement gap?
5. How would you describe central office leaders' practices provided to support your goals and action steps of addressing the achievement gap?

Research Question #4: *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

Semi-Structured Questions:

1. How do you feel you have addressed the achievement gap?
2. Describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices that address the achievement gap?
3. How have central office practices influenced your effectiveness in terms of addressing the achievement gap?
4. What central office leadership practices have been highly effective in addressing the achievement gap?
5. What additional supports do you need from central office leaders to assist you in addressing the achievement gap?

PHASE 3: Closing statements to Participants

Thank you so much for participating in this interview. I am grateful for your time, insights, thoughts and feedback. After I have reviewed the transcript of our conversation, may I contact you for additional questions? Please be assured that a written transcript will be made available to you upon your request. If you have any additional questions or information to share with me, I welcome the opportunity to connect with you. Please contact me at the number or email address on this card. As a reminder, this information will remain confidential. Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX D: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS AND DIRECT OBSERVATION FIELD NOTE-TAKING TEMPLATE

Date:

Location:

Name of Activity/Interaction Observed:

Start Time:

End Time:

Duration:

Purpose/Description of Activity/Interaction Observed:

Case Participants Involved:

Research Question(s) Addressed:

<p>Descriptive Notes: Detail what occurred and describe what was observed.</p>	<p>Reflective Notes: Describe Experiences, Hunches, and Learnings—inferences made beyond the data.</p>

APPENDIX F: DATA ANALYSIS MENTAL CONCEPT MAP

RESEARCH QUESTION 1 – *How do central office leaders, namely a Superintendent, a Director of Instruction and Assessment, and a Director of Special Education identify and describe the leadership practices provided to a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

INITIAL CODE

AXIAL CODE

THEME

THEME 1: TOP-DOWN DEVELOPMENT OF TOOLS

SUPERINTENDENT: TOP DOWN PROGRAM

DIA: TOP DOWN DEVELOPMENT OF

SPED: IDENTIFYING NEEDS AND PROVIDING

THEME 2: JOINT WORK AS THE GAINING OF BUY-IN AND DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITY

SUPERINTENDENT: ASSIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION
WITH STAFF

DIA: GAINING BUY-IN AND THEN DELEGATING

SPED: MEETING STAFF REPORTED NEEDS

RESPONSES FROM SUPERINTENDENT

TOP DOWN PROGRAM MODIFICATION

Academic Programming – Direct Impact on Gap: More Students in AP Classes

- Programs have impact
- High level of staffing have impact

- AP classes offering – cannot be all white kids
- AP not representing school population – under represent Black kids
- Impact AP on academic career and college success
- Key decisions in making sure certain programs in place

- Over the school year, more kids in AP classes
- Stay competitive and cannot cut

ASSIGNING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR IMPLEMENTATION WITH STAFF

Fiscal Responsibilities and Academic Programs: Student Numbers and Course Offerings

Smaller class sizes – not good business model

Conscious about talking with building level about classes and size of class

Conflict with programming and budget deficits

Curriculum decisions greatest impact on gap on success

Corrective Reading Classes – great impact

- Program offerings and fiscally responsible
- Prioritize offerings

- Only talk with building level about the numbers and staffing
- Budget Conscious
- If offer supports, cut other electives

Understand needs

Hard HR Decisions

Quality Educators: Programs alone don't solve issues

Staff attitude biggest issue – want small class, best kids

- Importance of quality teachers and programming
- Programs alone don't solve issue

Hard HR Decisions

Communication with Building Level Admin: Meetings and frequent conversations with buildings admins

Conscious about talking with building level about classes and size of class

“Touch base” more frequently is a challenge

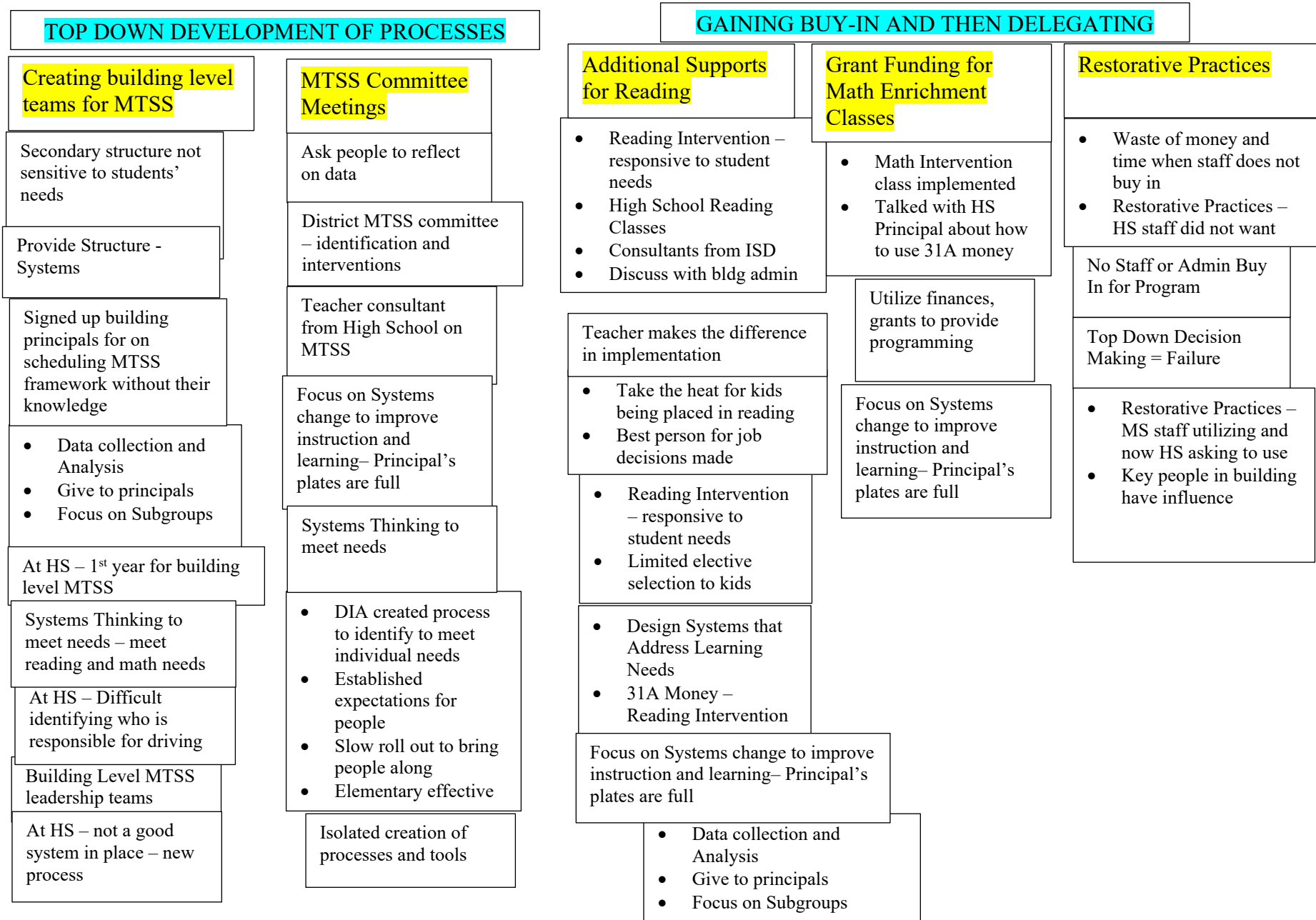
Knowledgeable of decisions DIA makes

Conscious about talking with building level about classes and size of class

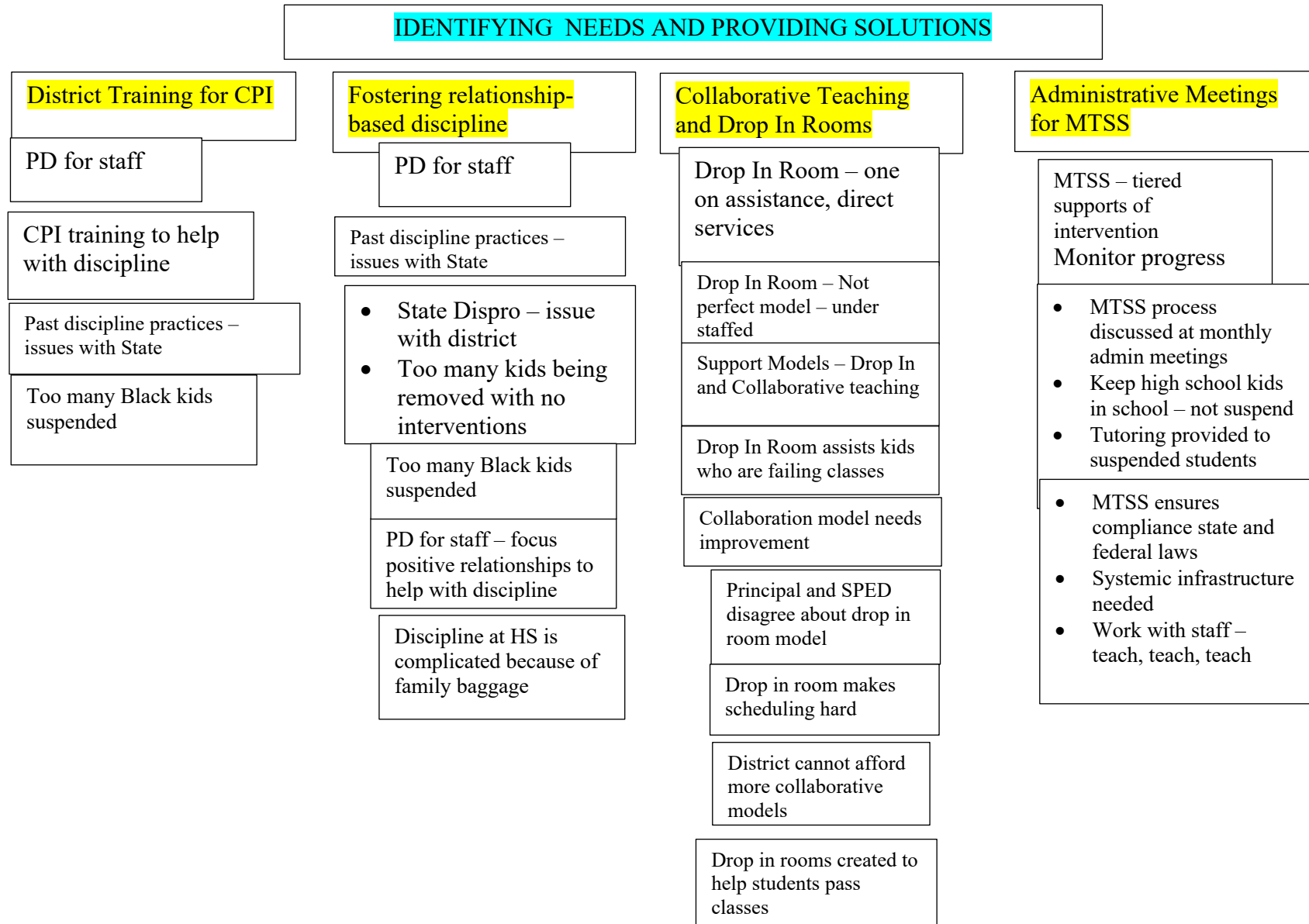
Understand needs

Conflict with programming and budget deficits

RESPONSES FROM DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT (DIA)



RESPONSES FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR (SPED)



RESPONSES FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR (SPED)

MEETING STAFF REPORTED NEEDS

Collaborating with Counselors

- Manage Crisis team
- Teacher-Coach roles

Taught counselors and building admin how to use PC

Personal curriculums help kids who have failed so can transition and graduate

- Counselors and Social Workers provide supports and services
- Lean on SPED for guidance

- Counselors and Social Workers sent to conferences
- Collaborative relationship

- Try not to micromanage counselors, social workers and teacher consultants
- Go into meetings with groups as needed

Developing Online Data Repository

SPED and DIA created MTSS process and tools

SPED and DIA created MTSS storage for all resources

Goals of MTSS

- MTSS ensures compliance state and federal laws
- Systemic infrastructure needed
- Work with staff – teach, teach, teach

One person from high school on MTSS district committee

Carry information to building for MTSS

- MTSS – tiered supports of intervention
- Monitor progress

Setting up Transition Plans and Services

Transition plans assist with success exit from high school to next step

DIA and SPED created personal curriculum guidelines and tools

Taught counselors and building admin how to use PC

Personal curriculums help kids who have failed so can transition and graduate

Hired Transition coordinator

Hired Transition coordinator – passion and competent

Observing and providing resources

Classroom Visit – Roll Up Sleeves – talk with kids

Student – “I’m doing better” due to drop in room set up

Classroom Visit – led to providing more resources

RESEARCH QUESTION 2 – *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school that has a documented academic achievement gap between Black and White students identify and describe central office leadership practices?*

INITIAL CODE

AXIAL CODE

THEME

THEME 3: ASKING ABOUT NEEDS AND FACILITATING SOLUTIONS

PRINCIPAL: ADVOCATING FOR STUDENT

ASSISTANT PRINCIPA: IDENTIFYING NEEDS

RESPONSES FROM PRINCIPAL

ADVOCATING FOR STUDENT NEEDS

Determination to have AP-Honors English Class

As more Black kids entered into school, honors and AP classes

Talked with DIA – Principal offered solution

Teacher Attitudes – Black kids not smart enough

Asked DIA to provide PD for teachers

- Achievement Gap happening – need to start pushing Black kids
- Level up

- Fight to get parents and students on board
- Teachers coming

Black kids need to be in honors classes

- Budget cuts – cut honors classes
- Needed to balance

- Principal made a “law” – same number of honors sections and regular sections to ensure larger classes sizes, honors not cut
- Equity and Access

Financially does not make sense to have smaller classes

COL not helpful in solution

Thought partner is DIA to share ideas with

Superintendent will not support low class numbers in honors/AP classes

- Achievement Gap happening – need to start pushing black kids
- Level up

Discussing data and college test prep

Success in college = Access to honors/AP classes for Black kids

Mainly communicate with DIA, he collects the data and shows it

SAT Prep class was returned when requested

COL willingness to provide what is asked for

Thought partner is DIA to share ideas with

Negotiating student numbers and course offerings

Support for smaller class sizes for SAT prep classes

Reading support and math support classes in schedule with low numbers

Keep COL in loop – only involve with have to

Believe COL should be inside of schools

Superintendent will not support low class numbers in honors/AP classes

Believes COL far removed

RESPONSES FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

IDENTIFYING NEEDS AND SOLUTIONS

Advocating for culturally relevant literature

- Thought about being a Black student reading certain text
- Important for students to read variety of literature
- Meaningful and Relevant text provided

Reading Support Classes

- “Get Central office on board” reading
- Support classes

Support for teacher PD

- COL provide specialized PD for teachers struggling
- More PD is needed for SEL
- In general need for support for students’ SE needs

Role of District Admin to ask what’s needed and provide resources

- Data digging not skillset
- Part of COL roles
- Provides resources for what is needed
- AP busy running a building

- “Get Central office on board” reading Support classes

- Monthly admin meetings
- Book study conducted – transformational leadership

- Focus on achievement gap done in curriculum meetings – DIA, Middle School principal involved
- Looking at data
- Talk about resources
- Sometimes Superintendent joins

In general need for support for students’ SE needs

RESEARCH QUESTION 3 – *How do central office leaders, namely a Superintendent, a Director of Instruction and Assessment, and a Director of Special Education identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices on addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students within a suburban high school?*

INITIAL CODE

AXIAL CODE

THEME

THEME 4: Central officer leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering and facilitating systemic solutions

SUPERINTENDENT: STAFF CAN LIMIT IMPLEMENTATION EFFECTIVENESS

DIA: EFFECTIVE IN COMPREHENSIVE COORDINATION AND OVERSIGHT OF SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

SPED: EFFECTIVE IN NEGOTIATING NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS ACROSS MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS

RESPONSES FROM SUPERINTENDENT

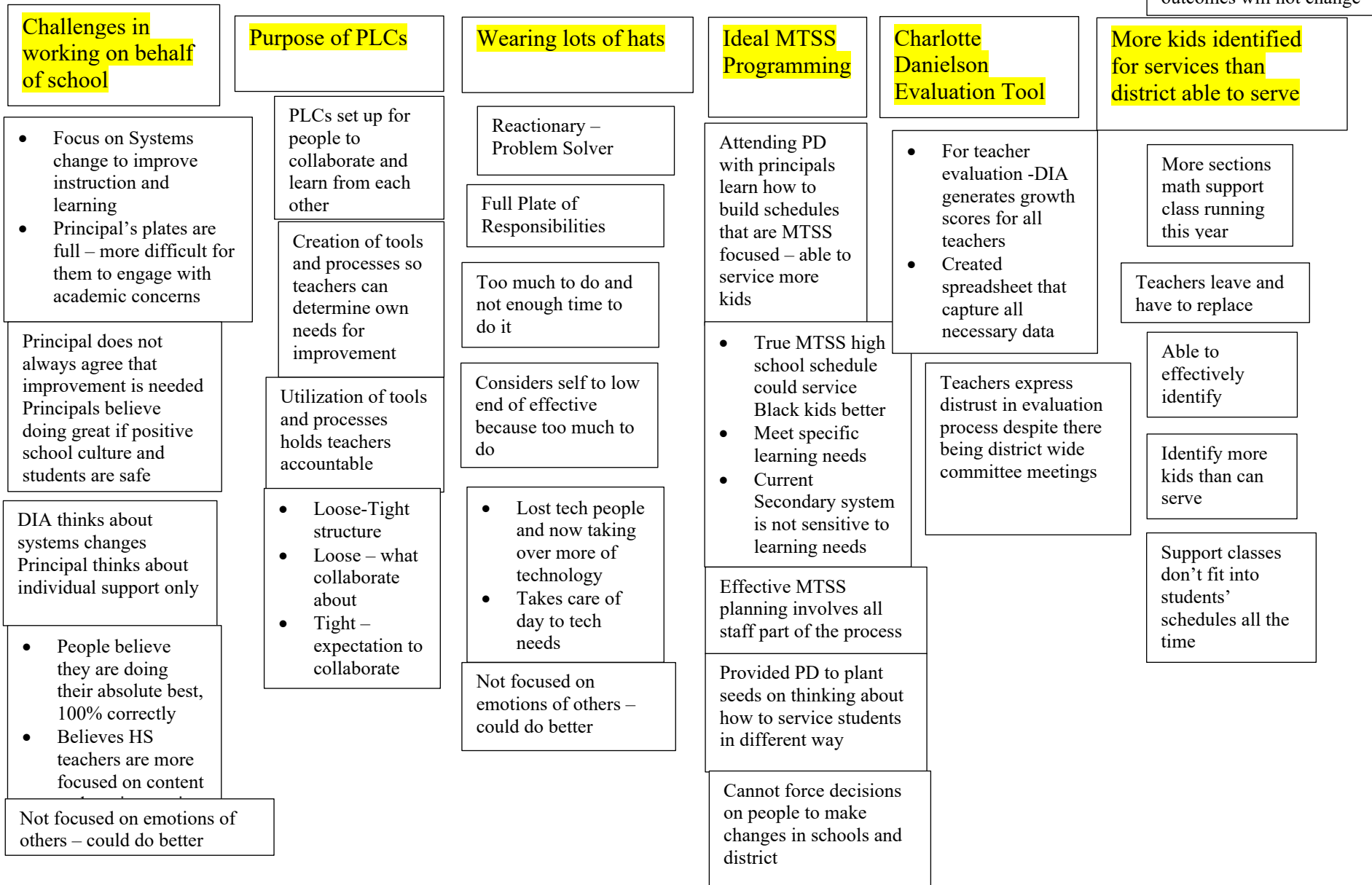
SUPERINTENDENT: STAFF CAN LIMIT IMPLEMENTATION EFFECTIVENESS

Curriculum office having greatest	Impact of reading support classes on gap	More time to meet principals	Providing more opportunities for students	Purpose and impact of walk throughs	Struggles negotiating changes with building administrators
Curriculum decisions greatest impact on gap and success	Corrective Reading Classes – great impact	Not enough time dedicated to meeting with principals	Smaller school population limits number of sections offered	Promote partnerships with principals when conduct together	“Struggle” comes from lack of trust
Knowledgeable of decisions DIA makes	Students need to be able to read to be successful in all subjects	Desires to conduct classroom visits with principals	Reflected over staffed for small number of students; impacts budget	Focus on instruction by helping principal think about feedback to teachers	Lack of trust is tied to title, not him as a person
Corrective Reading Classes – great impact	Had to make a choice. Reading support is a need.	curriculum office because he works more, they meet monthly- DIA meets with principals	More program offerings would benefit students	Able to identify deficits and more supports needed	Staff has more trust in building administrators
curriculum office because he works more, they meet monthly- DIA meets with principals	Selected reading over math supports	Wants high school staff to have more time for collaboration to impact student achievement	Financial deficit impacts ability to offer more opportunities	Help students by helping teachers improve	Lack of connection to teachers
DIA working with grants		PLCs implemented – work with principals on better implementation		Walk throughs should be routine; not stop instruction when visit classroom	Improve relationships with book studies on change
DIA not making decisions without Superintendent and Board being knowledgeable					Needs higher expectations of building leaders
					Too much free reign given to building leaders

RESPONSES FROM DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT (DIA)

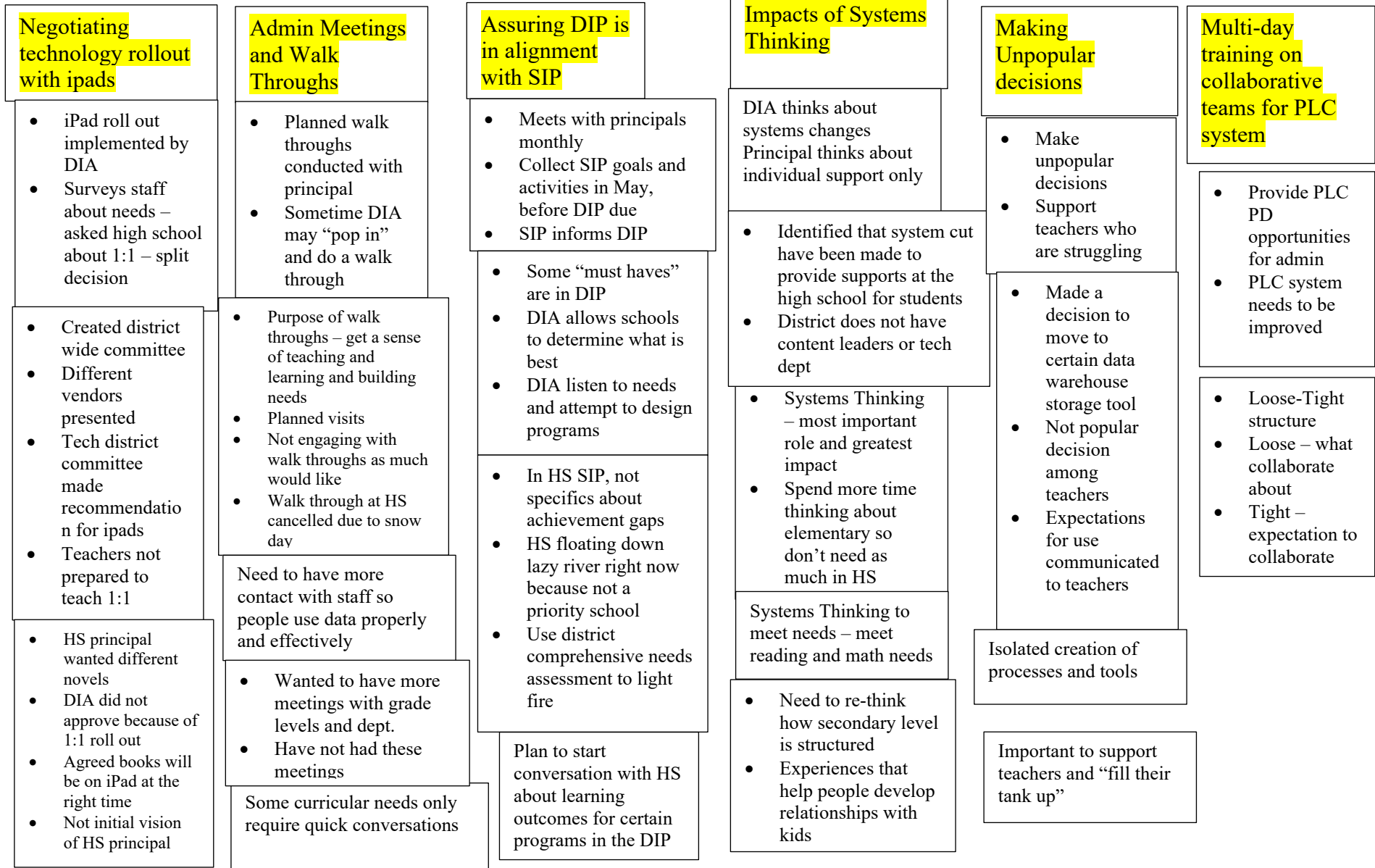
DIA: EFFECTIVE IN COMPREHENSIVE COORDINATION AND OVERSIGHT OF SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS

No sense of urgency felt by teachers and principals, learning outcomes will not change



RESPONSES FROM DIRECTOR OF INSTRUCTION AND ASSESSMENT (DIA)

DIA: EFFECTIVE IN COMPREHENSIVE COORDINATION AND OVERSIGHT OF SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS



RESPONSES FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR (SPED)

SPED: EFFECTIVE IN NEGOTIATING NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS ACROSS MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS

Dissent over specific protocol-model

Principal disagrees with identification process

Identified strong disagreement with process

Identified data and educational law that support SPED decision

DIA provides buffer between the SPED and principal

So far do good on drop in room

Previous model for student was not effective

Drop in room model proved effective by GPA tracking

Evidence of effective interventions

Previous model for student was not effective

Drop in room model proved effective by GPA tracking

Reoccurrence of discipline issues reduced

Suspending students is not productive for students

Views interventions as opportunities for kids to have more success in life

Issues with formulas handed down by State Department

Disagrees with state/federal policy - disproportionality

DIA worked on evidence that was state department to prove case – not using right data points

State formula is inadequate and unfair

Outcome of formula does not demonstrate actual improvements in behavior and efforts of to address issues

RESPONSES FROM SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR (SPED)

SPED: EFFECTIVE IN NEGOTIATING NEEDS AND CONSTRAINTS ACROSS MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS

Student need for role models

Black male students need Black male adult role models

SPED recognizes the importance of students being to relate to a person of their own race

Hire current staff member as district psychologist; person is a Black male

Emphasized the importance of being component and committed; don't just select candidate for being Black.

Children with IEPs need additional supports and attention from adults

Adults meet kids where they are

Lack of receptivity by principals

Principal does not listen to SPED directly

Easier to talk with principal when in group setting

Able to communicate better with AP

Principal views laws as a hinderance

Hiring as practice with greatest effect on gap

Teachers make the most difference in learning beyond any resource or strategy

High quality teachers can be challenging but kids highly benefit

Observes quality of teacher makes different in classroom management and student engagement

SPED directly involved in hiring of staff

RESEARCH QUESTION 4 – *How does the principal and assistant principal of a suburban high school identify and describe the effectiveness of central office leadership practices in addressing the academic achievement gap between Black and White students?*

INITIAL CODE

AXIAL CODE

THEME

THEME 5: CENTRAL OFFICE LEADERSHIP IS PRIMARILY EFFECTIVE IN FACILITATING ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

PRINCIPAL: UNMET TEACHER NEEDS CONTRIBUTE TO ATTRITION

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL: EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC SUPPORTS BUT STUDENTS HAVE UNMET, BASIC NEEDS

RESPONSES FROM PRINCIPAL

PRINCIPAL: UNMET TEACHER NEEDS CONTRIBUTE TO ATTRITION

District admins supportive but have different focus

- COL support role
- Recognize they have to make difficult decisions
- “Little behind”

COL not helpful with student discipline practices

- Recognizes that he could communicate better but “too much work”
- Principal prioritizes working with people in building

- COL stay out of the way
- Principal keep in loop
- Only involve with have to

Other financial priorities caused a delay in purchasing culturally relevant literature

Negotiating culturally relevant literature

During classroom observations, noticed kids bored with literature

For Black students – there is a need for culturally relevant literature

Other financial priorities caused a delay in purchasing culturally relevant literature

DIA agreed to purchase in the future

Teachers selected new literature and created new curriculum

Support for all-Black male literacy class

For Black students – there is a need for culturally relevant literature

All Black male literacy class continuously offered

Ideal for Superintendent to have office in each school-greater involvement

- COL stay out of the way
- Principal keep in loop
- Only involve with have to

Believes COL far removed

Believe COL should be inside of schools

COL may not have meetings in buildings because of interruptions

- COL need to be more present in school
- Need to have more urgency

- Teachers need to see COL in school and classroom
- Face to face support teachers

- COL need to be in buildings
- COL influence of effectiveness of principal: “I don’t think they really have.”

- How are superintendents making students and teachers feel?
- Article read – high poverty schools have high rate of principal turnover
- Create positive building culture, makes things better

COL don’t know what it is like to be teacher anymore
Disconnection

Teachers have left, taken pay cuts to work in districts where it is “easier”

- Culture eats strategy for breakfast
- Relationships matter first

Improve achievement gap, if know how to support teachers

RESPONSES FROM PRINCIPAL

PRINCIPAL: UNMET TEACHER NEEDS CONTRIBUTE TO ATTRITION

Discussions in meetings

COL may not have meetings in buildings because of interruptions

DIA will talk about student growth with principal

None of district administrator see value of PLC

COL disconnected from realities of children and families

- Principal attempts to have conversations with COL about culture, connection to school
- Only meet with COL regularly 1x a month

- Monthly admin meetings do not discuss achievement gaps.
- Topics – Retention and Special education
- Little direction with book club reading assignments
- Principal was not given a book

Significant disconnect – lack of Admin understanding

- COL stay out of the way
- Principal keep in loop
- Only involve with have to

Believes COL far removed

- Keep COL in loop – only involve with have to
- “Every once in a while” – contact when need thought partner

“There’s disconnect.” “There’s an absolute disconnect “

When teachers leave, take long time to post job

DIA expects principal and teachers to use tools they are not competent in using

PLCs - buildings and COL are disconnected with how PLC really

- Finds conferences to be valuable
- COL did not pay for conference where he was honored

Impact of Character Education program

PBIS program helps with positive relationships with Black kids

COL not helpful with student discipline practices

Placing more students in honors classes

- Principal cannot name COL practice that has been effective
- Need to focus on 9th graders – not just 11th and 12th graders; start earlier

- Building has focused on 9th and 10th graders with change in offerings – more on track
- Takes time to make change
- Principal creating more opportunity for AP classes

Convincing COL doing the best Principal can to balance classes and offerings

RESPONSES FROM ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL: EFFECTIVE ACADEMIC SUPPORTS BUT STUDENTS HAVE UNMET, BASIC NEEDS

Ability to provide support classes

Support classes effective

- Academic support is appreciated and needed, but not enough attention on social emotional needs of students
- Students have great needs
- Need more counselors/social workers

- Supportive COL
- Not most suggestions effective because comparing to other districts
- Every school culture different
- Compare self to self
- More data is needed – patterns identified based on elementary schools attended

District admin supportive but have different focus

- Building leaders meeting most basic needs of students – priority
- COL – focus on academics more, funding, scores
- Roles dictate the focus

- If ask – COL would be involved
- COL trust building leaders so stay out of way
- COL have different focus – more business
- Building leaders – humanitarian effort

- COL does not micro-manage
- Supportive
- Would like more suggestions
- AP willing to try new ideas
- Keep “guessing” what might work

Need for more social and emotional resources for students

- Address needs of students emotional health first, make the priority
- COL feet held to fire – deficit, state oversight

- More resources needed for social and emotional health of students
- Counselors doing a good job but full plates with other duties

- Counselor made request to DIA to apply for a grant for social -emotional learning
- DIA looked over grant, but did not follow through because would cost district money
- Trauma student incidences signal need more support

- Academic support is appreciated and needed, but not enough attention on social emotional needs of students
- Students have great needs
- Need more counselors/social workers

Discussion in Meetings

- Book talk discussions in district-level meetings
- Transformational change theme – working with teachers

- In district curriculum meetings discuss data
- Look at resources needed
- Admin all on same page

APPENDIX G: DATA ANALYSIS CODEBOOK

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
Theme 1: Top-down development of tools	
DIA: Top-down development of processes	
<i>Creating building level teams for MTSS</i>	1
<i>MTSS committee meetings</i>	3
Superintendent: Top-down program modification	
<i>Working to get more students into AP classes</i>	1
SPED: Identifying needs and providing solutions	
<i>District training for CPI</i>	3
<i>Fostering relationship-based discipline</i>	2
<i>Collaborative teaching and drop-in rooms</i>	5
<i>Administrative meetings for MTSS</i>	2
Theme 2: Joint work as the gaining of buy-in and division of responsibility	
DIA: Gaining buy-in and then delegating	
<i>Additional supports for reading</i>	1
<i>Grant funding for math enrichment classes</i>	2
<i>Restorative practices</i>	2
Superintendent: Assigning accountability for	

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
implementation to building staff	
<i>Meetings and frequent conversations with building admins</i>	1
<i>Programs alone don't solve problems</i>	2
<i>Student numbers and course offerings</i>	1
SPED: Meeting staff-reported needs	
<i>Collaborating with counselors</i>	3
<i>Developing online data repository</i>	2
<i>Goals of MTSS</i>	3
<i>Setting up transition plans-services</i>	7
<i>Observing-providing resources</i>	1
Theme 3: Asking about needs and facilitating solutions	
AP: Identifying needs and solutions	
<i>Advocating for culturally relevant literature</i>	1
<i>Reading support classes</i>	1
<i>Support for teacher PD</i>	1
<i>Role of District Admins to ask what's needed and provide resources</i>	2
Principal: Advocating for student needs	
<i>Determination to have AP-honors English classes</i>	7

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
<i>Discussing data and college test prep</i>	3
<i>Negotiating student numbers and course offerings</i>	1
Theme 4: Central office leadership practices are effective in developing, brokering, and facilitating systemic solutions	
DIA: Effective in comprehensive coordination and oversight of systemic solutions	
<i>Challenges in working on behalf of school-s</i>	3
<i>Purpose of plcs</i>	2
<i>Wearing a lot of hats</i>	1
<i>Ideal MTSS programming</i>	2
<i>Charlotte Danielson evaluation tool</i>	1
<i>More kids identified for services than district able to serve</i>	1
<i>Negotiating technology rollout with iPads</i>	3
<i>Administrative meetings and walk throughs</i>	3
<i>Assuring DIP is in alignment with the SIP</i>	2
<i>Impacts of systems thinking</i>	2
<i>Making unpopular decisions</i>	3
<i>Multi-day training on collaborative teams for PLC system</i>	1
SPED: Effective in negotiating needs and constraints	

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
across multiple organizational levels	
<i>Dissent over specific protocol-model</i>	8
<i>So far so good on drop in room</i>	1
<i>Evidence of effective interventions</i>	1
<i>Issues with formulas handed down by State department</i>	4
<i>Student need for role models</i>	2
<i>Lack of receptivity by principals</i>	3
<i>Hiring as practice with the greatest effect on gap</i>	4
Superintendent: Staff can limit implementation effectiveness	
<i>Curriculum office having greatest impact</i>	1
<i>Impact of reading support classes on gap</i>	2
<i>More time to meet with principals</i>	2
<i>Providing more opportunities for students</i>	1
<i>Purpose and impact of walk throughs</i>	1
<i>Struggles negotiating changes with building administrators</i>	3

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
Theme 5: Central office leadership is primarily effective in facilitating academic supports	
AP: Effective academic supports but students have unmet, basic needs	
<i>Ability to provide support classes</i>	2
<i>District admins supportive but have different focus</i>	3
<i>Need for more social and emotional resources for students</i>	3
<i>Discussions in meetings</i>	4
<i>Grant funding for math enrichment classes</i>	1
Principal: Unmet teacher needs contribute to attrition	24
<i>District admins supportive but have different focus</i>	1
<i>Negotiating culturally relevant literature</i>	3
<i>Support for all-Black male literacy class</i>	1
<i>Ideal for Superintendent to have office in each school-greater involvement</i>	4
<i>Discussions in meetings</i>	1
<i>Significant disconnect-lack of Admin understanding</i>	9
<i>Impact of Character Education Program</i>	2

Theme	References
Axial code	
<i>Initial code</i>	
<i>Placing more students in honors classes</i>	2

